



The only sovereignty

This may sound a little paranoid, but I suspect a conspiracy. I know you'd not expect it in a place like this, but appearances can deceive... The compiling of the preaching rota is a broadly straightforward and even-handed affair, aimed at giving *you* a variety of voices. Lindsay, whose job pulling together the rota was, did it wonderfully.

So why, I wonder, have I so often drawn the short straw over the years, for *this* Sunday? Looking back, I seem to have been the preacher more often than not. Why might that be a little unwelcome? Well, because this Sunday is a congested one and a bit tricky. The lectionary calls it *Christ the King*. It is also the *Sunday before Advent*. It is also known, less formally, as *Stir Up Sunday*. And in this 'Year C' (readings are on a triennial rotation) we have, as the Gospel, the serious and pivotal event of the Crucifixion.

It's a bit of a muddle of divergent themes. It reminds me of the programme *Ready Steady Cook* where the chef is given a random selection of ingredients and told to produce something edible.

In the East Window, above my head and at the very top, you will see *Christus Rex*, Christ the King. In such representations, Christ is shown in all the trappings of kingship and worldly power, as a reigning monarch.

For many of us, this looks like a bit of a misreading of the Gospels, because you might say that they witness to his *authority* rather than power.

And we are reminded virtually every day that power tends to harm those who hold it and

those over whom it is exercised: in nations, in organisations, in families. Many find this monarchical representation of Jesus off-putting.

Kings and Queens are distant from their subjects. They are untouchable. It is that distance, some say, that keeps the show on the road and the ruled-over in their place.

Of course, much of this will depend on your own view of God. And much of that may be the result of the images you picked up when young.

Perhaps it will also be shaped by your subsequent experience, and your politics.

Many Christians view God and the Christian faith as principally about order and structure and proper behaviour and just deserts, and you might say that the good old Church of England, Established by Law and chaplain to the nation, *tends* sometimes to emphasise all that.

Yet there are other Christians who by experience and by what they find in the gospels, tend towards a less orthodox view. For them, stripped of its leather bindings and Red Letters, and not taken in by its sometimes solemn but uninterrogated presentation in our liturgies, it speaks instead of something rather explosive.

For some of us these discoveries came after not at first grasping its flavour. But then, for whatever reason, we began to see it differently. And so, for some of us, the gospel of Christ is less about order and structure and more about an energy and perspective that

is, in purpose and in truth, destabilising and even disordering; less about those who are 'in' and those who are 'out' and more inclusive of everyone; not at all about hierarchies but pointing to a non-hierarchical vision which embraces all creation. Every bit of it.

More than that: it speaks of a truth in which conventionally-accepted truths get tossed out of the window. The last become first, the greatest the least, the outcast and lost welcomed and found.

One of the best expressions I know of this is the poem by the reportedly-grumpy poet R S Thomas, called *The Kingdom*. See what you make of it:

*It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.*

Hang on to that – as it were – *counter narrative* as we venture on. Another theme today is an anticipatory one, about Advent.

If you are new to the Church's Year, Advent is the season before Christmas, it starts a week today, and its job is to help us get ready to celebrate Christ in two ways: one looking backwards, the other forwards. Backwards, to his first coming, his birth; forwards to his second coming, His return 'in glory', when (the church claims) he will inaugurate a new reality.

Advent is largely lost as a recognisable, 'lived' season for Christians. At one time it was understood as a season of fasting, much like

Lent. It meditated on our current Exile and looked forward – in hope - to our future Exodus. For many it still has an element of expectancy and hope; and an inwardness, which if practiced can be an antidote to the noisiness of the noisy West's premature descent into Christmas.

If this interests you, why not reclaim Archbishop Cranmer's fine *Collect* for this Sunday, and stir yourself up? Today is known in Anglican churches as *Stir Up Sunday* from the Book of Common Prayer's "Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people". Today you find it as a post communion prayer, which we get to say later. Cranmer's 17thC Collect became something of a cliché in Anglican circles, because it falls at just the right time to remind congregations to go home and get stirring the ingredients for the Christmas Pudding. (Do that by all means, but don't let it be a substitute for stirring up your selves, too).

"When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah...

The soldiers also mocked him, poking fun at him, making a game of it. They toasted him with sour wine, saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!'

There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'

But the other one made him shut up, saying, 'Have you no fear of God? You're getting the

same as him. We deserve this, but not him – he did nothing to deserve this.'

Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you enter into your kingdom.' Jesus replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'" [Luke 23.33-43; today's Gospel]

We are used to hearing such readings in Holy Week. It may, at first, seem oddly placed today. Yet perhaps there is a link, and a corrected perspective of sorts.

One of the charges laid against him is that he calls himself the Messiah, a king [Luke 23.2]. Pilate finds no case against him, yet the crowd chooses a murderous political insurrectionist to be released instead of Jesus.

We heard the scoffing and the sarcastic taunting – by community leaders [v35]; by the soldiers [vv36-37]; by the unrepentant criminal [v39]; and also in the inscription placed over the Cross [v38].

Could it be that in these, we are shown something of the true nature of Jesus' kingship? The word remains, maybe, a stumbling block for us, today; but of the many things we see in Christ's Crucifixion is a new modelling of how power is exercised for God's purpose and our good.

There is, perhaps, something *regal* in this, and something paradoxical: the saving of others by not saving himself. A glimpse into the true nature of love which we too may from time to time glimpse in our own day. In this story, of Jesus, *in extremis*, we see a sovereignty of sorts, a sovereignty of love.

The times feel a little tense, don't you think? The world a little edgy. And in this United

Kingdom we feel a little unsafe, uncertain, divided and unclear about what might be best for our UK family and our European neighbours.

The planet seems now to be complaining about our abuse of it, speaking more loudly because we haven't been listening enough.

Our confidence in institutions and those who hold public office is less certain, it's been bashed about and tested, yet we long for exemplars we can trust and wholesome causes we can rally around.

John records Jesus saying to Pilate 'My kingdom is not from this world'. Who can be sure what is meant by this intriguing claim, but we might take from it the liberating view that though each of us is caught up in the affairs of this world, we are not limited to or by it.

This is an ancient Christian assertion: we are in the world but not of it. Amphibious: beings of time *and* eternity, of earth *and* heaven. There is a dual citizenship on offer.

We should be glad to take it. And to use it for the common good. It plays a crucial role in our taking the pulse of things, reading the signs of the times, and seeking to plot our own cycles of action and detachment, of knowing when to be stirred to action and when to be stirred by God to a period of attentive inaction and thoughtfulness, an advent attentiveness.

And, to hold on to the sovereignty of love, which is the truth the Gospels proclaim, and the only kind of power we are to live by.

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