

## Sermon: St Andrew, Corbridge, Christ the King 2018, Parish Communion

Reading: John 18. 36-38  
Title: What kind of King?

*May the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

Jesus said to Pilate, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom was from this world my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is from somewhere else.' Pilate responded, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king.'

*St John 18.36, 37.*

I wonder, would the author of the Fourth Gospel have approved of a Feast of Christ the King? Today is a very modern festival. It was introduced into the Roman Catholic calendar by Pope Pius XI in 1926, following the political turmoil in Europe in the aftermath of the First World War; both the fall of ancient monarchies and the advent of totalitarian communism. Originally celebrated in October, it was moved to this Sunday, the Sunday next before Advent, following the Second Vatican Council, and adopted by non-Roman Churches including our own. In many ways, the Festival is a response to secularism and atheism, to an optimistic view of human development in terms of evolutionary progress, to a modern arrogance that humankind has come of age, that 'things can only get better'. Christ is exalted as Lord and Judge before whom all earthly powers and rulers fall silent. Of course, back in 1926, the papacy itself was seen as a monarchy, with papal coronation and triple-tiara and all that; how different things look today under Pope Francis.

St John's Gospel has an interesting take on the language of 'king' and 'kingdom'. It is very different from the other three gospels, where Jesus' central message was his proclamation of the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. You will look in vain for the parables of the kingdom in John and for most of the fourth gospel Jesus resists the title king.

It is, however, in the passion narrative, that the theme of kingship becomes more prominent. In John's account of the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, the crowds shout,

*Hosanna. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord -*

to which John adds, *the King of Israel*. And Jesus then rides on a donkey which John states is in fulfilment of the prophecy of Zechariah,

*Behold, your King is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt.'*

So there is here a clear notion of kingship, but John immediately universalises it. This is not a narrow, nationalistic, view of dominion. In fact, in response to Palm Sunday, the unbelieving Pharisees become the prophetic voice – 'Look, the whole world has gone after

him', followed immediately by the request of some Greeks, Gentiles, who ask Andrew to take them to Jesus, which itself fulfils the prophecy; the world, Jews and Gentiles, are coming to him indeed. This is no tribal monarchy! Something universal is here.

So when Jesus stands before that symbol of all-powerful Caesar, Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor, Pilate's view of kingship can only be narrow and nationalistic – Jesus is merely 'King of the Jews', a potential though pathetic threat to Caesar. Jesus blows Pilate's narrow vision away – 'My kingship, if we have to use such language, is not of this world'; it is not about political domination which requires conflict, wars, fighting. 'My kingship is from somewhere else'. 'So you are a king?', says Pilate. 'You really don't get it, do you?'

Yet the unbelieving Pilate also becomes the prophet. He dresses Jesus up in crown and robe and sceptre - thorns, a soldier's cloak, a reed; he writes an inscription – 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews' but he writes it in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek – all the languages of the world for all to see. Something universal is here.

And if kingship is all about authority, John's poetic vision of the Passion is regal indeed. For the Cross is Jesus' lifting up; his glorification. Look at the crucifix behind me – it is called *Christus Rex*, and it is a picture of John's theology. It is as if the Cross is an exalted throne which Christ ascends. For not only does Jesus, the powerless One, judge and confound the seemingly all-powerful Pilate, but he assumes entire control.

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus is mocked; in John there is no mockery. When Jesus appears as king in crown, robe and sceptre, the soldiers do not mock him; they *strike* him. This is pure violence; this is what happens when darkness meet Light, when hatred meets Love. In John, Jesus carries his own cross; he doesn't need a Simon of Cyrene to complete his work. In John, all that happens on the Cross is pre-ordained, nothing happens by chance; Jesus' vesture is distributed in fulfilment of Psalm 22 and he cries *I thirst* in order to fulfil Psalm 42. And then finally, when he cries out in triumph, *It is accomplished*, he is not executed, he does not simply die, rather of his own volition he 'gives up' the ghost; the sense of the Greek is he hands over his life, he hands over *the* spirit, a probable allusion to the release of the Holy Spirit to the Church because Jesus has been glorified. And for John, this ascent continues, this lifting up – for in his theology, Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension are seen as a single movement, so when he meets the Magdalene on Easter Morning, Jesus says, 'Do not cling on to me, for I am ascending to my Father and your Father to my God and your God'. The lifting up on the Cross is to raise Christ to the heavenlies. Something universal is here.

So would the author of the Fourth Gospel approve of a Feast of Christ the King? Well, up to a point. Today I think he would put the word 'king' in heavily inverted commas. For after all, in the original conclusion to the Gospel, he says these things are written that we should believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Here kingship gets no mention. And the great symbol of Jesus' glorification is his lifting up that he might draw the whole world to himself. This is not the language of power or coercion; it is rather the image of arms opened wide – as in this cross behind me, to bring all things into his strong embrace; it is a love that seeks out the lost, that redeems suffering and death, that beckons us into God's future where darkness is confounded.

Earthly kingdoms, rulers, ideologies and 'isms' come and go; the papal triple-tiara is now an exhibit in a museum, but the Cross stands eternally over the world, the all-pervasive love of God made perfect in our human weakness. That is the strange 'kingship' that we celebrate today.