

## **Christ the King 2019 Evensong (24.11.19)**

**1 Samuel 8: 4 – 20; John 18: 33 – 37**

It's the Feast of Christ the King; the last Sunday of the Church's year. Next Sunday, Advent Sunday, we go back to the beginning, starting to recount once again the great drama of God's saving grace revealed through Jesus Christ. We began to do that last Advent Sunday and today the drama is complete: it has been fully unfolded: we've arrived at its climax. The story began with that wait for light to break into the darkness through Advent; we celebrated Jesus' birth at Christmas; his significance was revealed throughout Epiphany; we journeyed through Lent with Jesus and endured with him, in spirit, the agonies his passion, his suffering and crucifixion, and then shared the joy of his resurrection; we welcomed the Holy Spirit at Pentecost; and spent months of ordinary time on the goodness of his life; and during these weeks since All Saints' we've pondered on the hallmarks of his kingdom.

And now we've almost come full circle: after birth, life, death and resurrection, we celebrate the completion of Jesus' earthly ministry and affirm that he is reunited with the Godhead. He is the King, reigning on high and we live in anticipation of his reign being fully inaugurated here on earth.

It sends you reaching for readings like Revelation chapter 4: "At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! And the one seated there looks like jasper and cornelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald."

I used to be the vicar of a church that, architecturally, was totally different to this church: it was Georgian preaching box built in the eighteenth century. The box pews in the nave had long gone, but they were still present in the gallery on three sides. There wasn't a distinct chancel as there is in this church, although the three-decker pulpit which once dominated the front of

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the church had been removed – as we know, the only constant in life is change. What that revealed more fully was that the back wall, or east wall, wasn't just a flat wall. There was a semi-circular apse in the wall with a wonderful Venetian window, three lights, the outer ones having flat tops and the centre one having a semi-circular arched top.

At some stage, I think in the 1960s, they'd put a set of semi-circular altar rails in front of the apse so that the altar stood in the middle of a complete circle; and on the ceiling above – and of course it was a flat, plastered ceiling: no exposed roof timbers as there are here – on the ceiling there was a painting of the most marvellous Christus Rex, Christ the King. It was done somewhat in the manner of an icon. And you could read Revelation chapter 4 in the images depicted. There was Jesus sitting on his throne with orb and sceptre; over him was a rainbow; in front of him was a glassy sea; and all around were the fantastical creatures that are described later in the chapter. It is

really stunning: a rich majestic statement of Christ's majesty and an acknowledgment that all our worship is conducted under that majesty.

We've got to be careful, though, to ensure that all this celebration of Christ the King doesn't become distastefully triumphalistic. And both our readings this evening help us guard against it. The Old Testament reading from 1 Samuel reminds us that there is a fine tradition of scriptural suspicion of kingship. Samuel tells the Israelites in no uncertain terms just what kings are like: they exploit the people over whom they rule, either economically or by using them as cannon-fodder in warfare. Kings, as we know them are not to be trusted and they are not to be wishes upon any unsuspecting people.

The kingship of Christ is quite the opposite of the sort Samuel warns against. It is quite the opposite of triumphalistic. The kingship of Christ is seen in our New Testament lesson from John 18 when Jesus is

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being tried before Pilate. It is a kingship which is “not from this world.” Just as Samuel had warned that a king would “take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots,” so Jesus points out that “[i]f my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews.” But that’s not how it is. Jesus inverts and subverts everything we understand about kingship.

Jesus expressly prohibited his followers to offer armed resistance to his arrest. He allowed himself to be tried, mocked, tortured and executed. His so called triumphal entry into Jerusalem had been bathetic: he had come into the city on a bizarrely humble donkey. He lived his life in an unfashionably provincial location and incurred the disapprobation of the righteously indignant by keeping bad company. He was born in a cattle shed and spent his infancy as a migrant refugee. It’s not the stuff of kingship as we

know it and not the manner of kingship that instinctively commands our loyalty.

So if we are going to proclaim Christ as our King we’re going to have to allow his Holy Spirit to subvert our instincts and we’re going to have to have the courage to commit our loyalties to a manner of kingship that leaves us utterly vulnerable, vulnerable to ridicule and ruination. Christ the King will not be found seated on a throne holding an orb and sceptre, with a rainbow around him and something like a sea of glass, like crystal in front of him. Christ the King is to be found amongst the destitute, the exploited and the marginalised. And he’s to be found not just amongst those who have become destitute, exploited and marginalised in ways that it’s comfortable for us feel pity about. He’s to be found amongst the destitute, exploited and marginalised, full stop. So before we proclaim Christ the King, we need to seek the grace and the courage to do so. Amen.