

24th November 2019

Preacher: Revd Dr John Lampard

Hymns: **57 Let all the world in every corner sing**
 351 In Christ alone my hope is found
 777 Jesus, remember me
 319 Christ triumphant, ever reigning
 185 Sing we the King who is coming to reign

Readings: **Psalm 46**
 Colossians 1:11-20
 Luke 23:33-43

“CHRIST THE KING, BUT WHAT SORT?”

Today marks the end of the church's liturgical year. We started 12 months ago with Advent and journeyed through the familiar pattern of Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and then were the long, long Sundays afterwards with no 'Festivals' to enliven them. It has been suggested by scholars that the reason that all the Festivals are in the first half of the church year is that in the second half of the year, after Pentecost the common people were out in the fields growing and harvesting and had less time for church life.

If a Sunday is not associated with a festival it is called an Ordinary Sunday, and today is the 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, the last. The danger with a long period of 'Ordinary Time' Sundays is that they drag on and on and ends in the words of T S Eliot, 'not with a bang but a whimper'. It just fades away. But in more recent years, since in the middle of the 20th century, the main Churches in the world have designated this Sunday as a celebration of Christ the King. That is definitely a 'bang' subject and not a 'whimper' one.

I'm aware that a title like Christ the King can be more meaningful for countries that have a governmental system based on a monarchy, but I'm not sure how it plays with the vast number of countries with republican governments. I know there is throughout the world a strong fascination with our monarchy here, but however wonderful people think it is, it is not the model the Bible offers.

Although Christ the King comes easily to our lips, the truth is that in the Gospels the words 'Christ' and 'King' are not used together as a title for Jesus. Of course the title given to Jesus by his followers, 'Christ' means 'the anointed King'. And you will remember that at his trial Pilate asked Jesus, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' But this is different from the Christian understanding of Christ the King.

So what picture do you hold in your mind when you hear the words 'Christ the King?' For many of us it is Christ reigning in glory. Sometimes he is pictured seated on the right hand of God surrounded with angels and archangels, the hosts of heaven and the saints. Other times, particularly in Orthodox iconography he is pictured alone, but as a figure of immense power. Some of you will have seen the tapestry in Coventry

Cathedral, which overwhelmed me the first time I saw it, with his awesome, humble dignity. Christ the King is a powerful and enduring image.

But for others of you it may be the harrowing pictures of Jesus with a crown of thorns jammed onto his head and blood running down as he is mocked. Or again, influenced by today's reading it is Jesus on the cross. The harrowing image that Luke gives us is this picture of Jesus on the Cross, a method of death designed to suffocate and exhaust a victim. The bystanders and one of the criminals executed with Jesus knew what it meant to be king. Kings look after themselves. So they taunted Jesus with the demand that he uses his kingly power to save himself. But for Jesus kingly power is not about saving yourself, but saving others.

Haven't you noticed how, time and again, people of power and influence just fail to 'get' what Jesus is about? It is the powerless, the poor, the overlooked who 'get' what Jesus is about.

The wonderful Good News which Luke offers us here is that even in the extremity of death, we can respond to Jesus and die in hope. Jesus responds to the words of the penitent criminal, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom', by saying 'Today you will be with me in Paradise'. May these words, more than anything I say, remain with you after this service.

And what made him Christ the King? Not that he was called it. Not that he demanded that he be addressed that way. Not that he wore a kingly crown and regalia.

No, what makes him Christ the King was that he revealed the true glory and nature of God in his self-offering his servanthood. Most of us will be familiar with the words of Paul in his letter to the Philippians. Speaking about Jesus he said:

And being found in human form
He humbled himself
And became obedient to the point of death
Even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
And gave him the name that is above every name
So that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.

Because of Christ's servanthood, he is raised up as king.

Now I want to make a radical offer to you. You can become a king, or queen for a day! Before you get too excited I should mention you don't get to Buckingham Palace or wear a crown. You become a king or a queen in God's eyes when you offer service to others. You become true royalty through your servanthood.

I'm increasingly aware how many people I meet day by day who are in what is called the service industry or hospitality industry. Just think through a typical day. On one day I counted, even before I left home, the delivery driver, the postman, the bin men, and the street sweeper. After that it was the news vendor, the bus driver, the railway station cleaner, ticket barrier operator, the platform assistant, the train driver, the shop assistant, and then arrh the person who serves me in the coffee shop.

After that it was off to the hospital for a visit, and I met the parking attendant, the security person, the volunteer who pointed me in the right direction, ward clerk, the ward cleaner, the nurse, then as I waited arrh the person who runs the hospital shop and coffee stall, the doctor, the X- ray operator, the pharmacist. You get the point?

And then there are the hidden people who serve us day by day, the people who ensure we have power and light, keep the drains clear, keep our parks tidy, dig holes in the road, sweep the leaves off the line, the night workers who clean the offices or prepare the trains for the next morning. And what about the people who daily clean public toilets?

And while I'm at it, what about the people who perform the role of servant in this church? I'm thinking of the people who week by week get here early to open up, and prepare this wonderful place for worship. The door stewards, the hymnbook stewards, the sound and camera operators, the communion stewards, our organist, choir leader and choir, the vestry stewards, offering stewards, collection counters, the heritage stewards, the arrh the volunteers who serve coffee and tea after the service, and those who make the sandwiches – and those who clear and tidy up afterwards. And those who lock up and keep the place secure.

As I have listed all these people I'm sure you will have thought of others, and I may well have included you in that list.

What is terrible, I call it a sin, is when people look down on or deride people who serve. I heard of a teacher who told a class, 'if you don't work at your school lessons you will end up stacking shelves in Tesco'. Where would we be if people did not stack the shelves for us in Tesco?.....or other available stores. Servanthood, and especially the most humble and demeaning is a model of what Christ revealed on the Cross. He calls us to serve.

What I want to emphasise is that when you are a servant, in God's eyes you are a king, or a queen. You may not feel it, you may at times feel downtrodden, ignored or reviled, but you are lifted up by God and exalted when you become a servant. You are walking in the footsteps of the Christ the servant king. And if you don't feel it, it may be because others of us have not fulfilled God's role, by lifting you up.

What I mean is this. We lift people up when we acknowledge their act as a servant, acknowledge them and thank them. I learned this many years ago when I lived in a very poor part of London. There were no meals on wheels, so a few of us set up a Sunday Meals on Legs service. We cooked a large meal and walked or ran round to neighbours who lived alone carrying a plate of hot food and a cover. Very proud of myself on my first Sunday I ran round with a hot meal and knocked at the basement door of an old man. As I entered his room I noticed a distinct smell. 'I couldn't get to the loo in time' he said, 'Will you help change my pants?'. I gulped and put the meal down, and without going into details, helped get him sorted. He didn't say a word. Finally I helped sit him down with the meal, and as I left he called out, 'it's gone cold!'

How many people, who day by day serve others, feel as unappreciated as I did then? But remember, as Jesus suffered on the Cross, reviled and mocked by many, there was only one person, at that time, who appreciated what Christ the King did on the cross.

Time and again I have heard people who serve so dispirited. An example. I was in a supermarket and couldn't find what I was looking for. I asked an assistant who was doing something else, he got up from what he was doing, and took me to the correct aisle and to the item I was looking for. I thanked him, and he turned to me sadly and said, 'Thank YOU, so few people ever say thanks' to us.

We honour Christ the servant King, who offered himself for us, when we honour those who serve us. And in our self-offering we honour Christ the King, because we follow in his path. In self-offering we follow in the footsteps of Christ the King.

Finally, apart from this being Christ the King, this Sunday is also known as Stir Up Sunday. It's the day that traditionally Christmas cakes and puddings are 'stirred up'. Many of you will know it gets its title from the traditional Collect for today.

As we worship Christ the King, may we respond in the words of the Collect:

Stir up, O Lord, the wills of your faithful people, that they bringing forth the fruit of good works, may by you be richly rewarded, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.