

Christ the King 2019 – a reflection

We reach the last Sunday of the Church Year, knowing that next week Advent will be upon us – a new liturgical year. In some ways this can be viewed as disorientating when the civil year still has more than a month to go before it reaches its last gasp! I think that there is value in this disjuncture. It reminds us that we are called to look at the world through the eyes of Faith – to try to bring the knowledge of the intimacy of the way in which we know the pull of God within our lives into every interaction we have with those we meet. This can in itself also sometimes be difficult or even disorientating.

The climax of every liturgical year is the Feast of Christ the King, or to give it its full Roman Catholic title: *The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe*. It is a modern celebration, not yet a hundred years old, instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as a focus for Christian hope in the face of severe persecution which was then taking hold both within Europe and other parts of the world (at that point most notably in Orthodox Russia, Spain and Mexico). It was a response not just to the rise of Communism in its most virulent atheistic manifestation but also of right-wing extremism and nationalism. The encyclical establishing the Feast had this to say: *'If to Christ our Lord is given all power in heaven and on earth; if all humanity, purchased by his precious blood, are by a new right subjected to his dominion; if this power embraces all peoples, it must be clear that not one of our faculties is exempt from his empire. He must reign in our minds, which should assent with perfect submission and firm belief to revealed truths and to the doctrines of Christ. He must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God. He must reign in our hearts, which should spurn natural desires and love God above all things, and cleave to him alone. He must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments for the interior sanctification of our souls, or to use the words of the Apostle Paul, as instruments of justice unto God.'*

Gulp! That all seems quite a call. Many might also question monarchical titles within our faith journey. How are we to approach such a concept? Does it still have value in this day and age?

Our Judaeo-Christian heritage contains many images of kingship, primarily of God. *'The Lord is King and has put on glorious apparel,'* writes the psalmist (Psalm 93), and *'The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!'* (Psalm 99:1) Isaiah expresses the uniqueness of God in his prophecy: *Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: I am the first and I am the last: besides me there is no god. (Isaiah 44: 6)*. We have the struggles in order within tribal Judaism which eventually results in the grasping at kingship, of which only David and Solomon's reigns provide anything like stable government (although it is often rocky for them!).

In the New Testament, kingdom language become a running theme of the ministry of Jesus: *Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'* (Mark 1: 14-15). Jesus teaches us the model prayer where praise of God is followed

by a plea for the fulness of Kingdom Life here and now: ‘Pray in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as in heaven.’¹ I think what we should note from the way in which Jesus uses the concept of ‘The Kingdom’ is as revolutionary in its understanding as that of his Messiahship. In many ways the two concepts are intertwined, turning both original concepts on their heads. This is where the real benefit of today’s Feast can find its true roots.

Jeremiah looks forward to a time of restoration between God and his people where justice and righteousness will mark a new relationship. The royal lineage of David is called to play (Matthew starts his Gospel with a genealogy of the royal line) as a sign of connection within salvation history. We should not underestimate the sense of disconnection from God indicated by Jeremiah to the people, and he points to a new way of understanding true security and a sense of connection within the community. This new leader is imagined in royal terms, yes, but the name the prophet uses: ‘The Lord is our Righteousness,’² points to a kingship which means looking at the world in a different way. In fact, the Hebrew original seems to be a play on the name Zedekiah spelt backwards³. This allows us to view the whole concept of what constitutes the pathway of faith in an utterly different way.

In the passage from Colossians, we are given the transformative imagery of the way in which Jesus came to be viewed in the earliest days of the Church: *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.* Verses 15-20 may be based on an early creed or baptismal statement. Yet this wonderful piece of prose seems as far removed as it can be from the Gospel passage from Luke set for today. We are at Golgotha – not much more than a rubbish tip - at the foot of three crosses. As we read, we experience some of the different sorts of cruelty which humanity is capable of – torture, rabid insult and mockery. The two malefactors represent a sort of *ying* and *yang* in terms of response to the situation they experience as they hang on either side of Jesus.

In his powerful poem *To the Good Thief*,⁴ the Welsh poet Saunders Lewis captures the squalor of the scene together with the divine empathy displayed by Jesus:

It was in the revel of a crowd of sadists carousing on sorrow,
And their shriek, howl, curse, and shout,
You heard the profound lament of the broken heart of their prey,
‘Why have you forsaken me?’

You crucified on the right, on the left, your brother,
Writhing like toads that were skinned,
Flea-ridden pilferers tossed as retainers to deride Him,
Courtiers for a mock king in agony.

¹ (Matthew 6: 9-10)

² Sometimes translated as ‘The Lord is our Vindicator.’

³ Zedekiah, original name Mattaniah, (flourished 6th century BC), king of Judah (597–587/586 BC) whose reign ended in the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of most of the Jews to Babylon.

⁴ Selected Poems – Saunders Lewis, trans Joseph P. Clancy. University of Wales Press, Cardiff 1993

Oh master of courtesy and manners, who enlightened for you
Your part in this savage charade?
'Lord, when you enter your kingdom, remember me,' –
The kingdom conquered by dying.

Where is the victory in the death of Jesus? What sort of a king is he? What does this mean to us as Christians in 2019?

All becomes abundantly clear in verse 20 of the Colossians passage:

In him [Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Through this act of overwhelming love of giving himself on the cross he leads all peoples to know the fulness of life found in his teaching and example. We ourselves are drawn to the Kingdom Live in him and through him. In every situation we are called to know his presence through the power of the Holy Spirit. In every facet of our lives, we are called to allow the Divine Light of self-giving Love to illuminate our journey. In doing so, we begin to understand the true nature of his Kingship – a call for us to grow spiritually through assessing every aspect of our lives in him and through him. The Good Thief owns his flaws and sees new life and righteousness in Jesus, who makes true peace for **all** through the blood of his cross. To him be the glory forever!



Jan Van Eyck – The Adoration of the Lamb (Ghent Cathedral) before 1432

Jeremiah 23: 1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord.

² Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. ³ Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴ I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.

⁵ The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'

Colossians 1: 11-20

¹¹ May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³ He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.^[a]

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.

¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in^[i] him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Luke 23: 33-43

³³ When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus^[a] there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴ Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' And they cast lots to divide his clothing. ³⁵ 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^[c] of God, his chosen one!' ³⁶ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, ³⁷ and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' ³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'

³⁹ One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding^[e] him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah?^[i] Save yourself and us!' ⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?' ⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' ⁴² Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'

⁴³ He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'