

## **Christ the King – Sung Eucharist, Holy Trinity, Guildford, November 22 2009**

Readings: Daniel 7: 9,10,13-14/Rev 1:4b-8/Jn 18:33-37

'My Kingdom is not from this world' (Jn 18: 36), says Jesus, in a teasing reply at his trial by Pontius Pilate. And that takes us off on one of those journeys of discovery. The interviewer – Pilate - thinks he has the celebrity – Jesus - just where he wants him. The producers behind the scenes – the Jewish authorities – have provided Pilate with their questions. And all this is served up for us, not during Holy Week, where we'd expect it, but at the back end of the year, when our thoughts are turning towards Christmas, canned carols, mulled wine, and much else.

So why do we have this reading today? Well, it's Christ the King, we're told. The feast was introduced in the Roman Catholic Church in 1926, when the old monarchies of Europe had mostly disappeared in the cataclysm of the First World War; and it has spread to other Churches in recent years. What better a way to respond to social catastrophe than to point to Christ's kingship? On the surface, that might seem a reasonable response. But as we all know well, power in the Church can be a dicey business, because all the time we are dealing with the humanity of the organization, with all its power-games, which can operate just as easily in parishes as in dioceses – and beyond. Someone recently remarked that the Church of England at present resembles a swimming-pool – with all the noise coming from the shallow end! Perhaps this includes those who keep lecturing us about taking the Bible literally, which it was never intended to be; and those few who are fawning over the Pope's recent extraordinary initiative

We therefore need to be a bit wary of turning this feast into an exercise in ecclesiastical triumphalism, some kind of puffed up assertion of the Church over the world, with Christ reigning in the glory. It is after all John's gospel, from which today's reading is taken, that depicts Jesus reigning not from a throne, but from the cross, the same cross to which Pilate, the Jews, all of us managed to nail him. So he is King, somehow. Not an hereditary monarch – in those days Kings were often chosen, and sometimes deposed. For the Jews of the time, 'kingship' was essentially religious. It was about the practice of their faith. Yet Jesus is about something much larger and more far-reaching than that. And they didn't like him in the end, because he challenged their faith, and seemed poised to turn it upside down. They could have had him stoned to death – a quick way to go – for blasphemy, a religious offence, because he claimed to be the Son of God. But they wanted to broaden his offence into political sedition, which only Pilate could punish, by the much slower and more painful and publicly disgraceful death, by crucifixion.

So what of Pilate's thoughts? He wasn't the world's greatest diplomat as the local Roman Governor. He had a history of upsetting the Jewish people, and he must have realised that this religious row was important. But for him, as an officer of the Roman Emperor, it was the political aspect of kingship that was central. What kind of real power might this man Jesus claim? And that is another question that echoes down the centuries. Political power can be just as ambiguous as religious power, because all power has to be tested, held accountable. In Pilate's case, it was with the emperor, who could not be let down. In our day, it is a raft of other factors, from public opinion, through our democratic processes, including the Church's synodical systems, to the prophetic voice that comes from right outside. I wish we could be a Church that was more ready to listen to that critical clamour. Not from right-wing journalists, ever carping at us Anglicans for having the courage to say that life can be tough, and faith can be complex; but from our commitment to use reason, the experience of God in the world, to inform our faith – like the ordination of women, not just as deacons and priests, but as bishops as well.

The fact of the matter is that by the time Pilate has finished with Jesus, the tables have been turned completely. It is Jesus who has put Pilate on trial. And it is therefore the Church, as well as our political and social structures, that are on trial as well. We can all play the word-game with each other, but the truth will always evade us as long as we look at everything superficially. In John's gospel, nothing is ever quite as simple as it seems. For example, unlike the other gospels, John's Jesus says nothing about the Kingdom of God. Instead, for the first time, here, at his trial,

he speaks about his Kingdom, his Kingship. It is not about propping up a religious system because the adherents don't want to be shaken at any price; nor is it about supporting a political system – of whatever kind – because that's the way things have always been.

So this quaintly-termed feast of Christ the King fits quite well today after all. It acts as a sort of hinge between November, the month of remembering, and Advent, with all those sobering themes of judgement and renewal. Christ the King begins by putting Jesus on trial, with all our piffling religious and political prejudices thrown at him, and it ends by placing all of us – all of us - in the dock. Christ on trial turns out to be us on trial, leaving us unmasked, and revealed for what we are, vulnerable, struggling people, stripped of pretensions, in a way that can prepare us for God's Kingdom – the cosmic, universal reign, from the beginning to the end of all things, as echoed in today's readings from Daniel and Revelation. That is the kind of Kingdom to which we are called as nothing less than its citizens.

In North Africa in the early fifth century, when the world – and the Church – seemed to be collapsing around him, St Augustine preached on this very passage, and had this to say: 'What further reassurance do you seek? Come to the kingdom that is not of this world. Do not be enraged by fear, but come by faith.' (Tractates on John's Gospel, 115.2, preached c. 419 AD.)

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