

Feast of Christ the King, Matins
1 Samuel 8:4-20, John 18:33-37
Mother Alice

Today is the Feast of Christ the King, and it's an opportunity for us to ponder what it means for us to say that Jesus is Lord over all the earth. Perhaps our views of earthly monarchy are very different to our views of eternal monarchy, perhaps we seldom make the connection. It sounds obvious but it's worth remembering that the Kingdom of God does in fact have a King. Whatever we believe about the Kingdom says something about what we believe also about the King, and vice versa. And as we lead into the season of Advent, we are reminded of the nature of the coming of Christ in the Nativity, and we look forward in hope and expectation of his second coming amongst us. But of the many titles for Jesus – the Son of God, the Son of Man, the Son of David, the Lord, the Messiah, the King – of these I feel 'King' is not the one most of us would immediately gravitate too, especially in our own personal prayers.

I do find it interesting to think about where there are strong associations with Jesus as King in the Church today. We find it in the theology of the Pentecostal Church, and in so many gospel songs. We find it also in many songs aimed at children in church, and well as woven around the Christmas and Easter hymns. There's a church in Acton that we used to visit often as they put on the most wonderful children's activities and events, and my husband and I used to joke that whenever we visited, whether it be for a nativity, or an All Hallows Light party, or even a baptism, we all ended up making Crowns from their rather lavish craft supplies box. The Crown of course is the symbol of Kingship, and yet we know that the only crown Christ ever wore on earth was the Crown of thorns. What is important is that if we believe that Jesus is the King, and that we pray for the coming of His Kingdom, that we are clear just what our theology is, so that we can truly allow this rich imagery to shape of love of Christ and longing for His Kingdom.

The readings appointed for today really help us with that, because they turn things on their heads, with regard to the theme of Kingship. We join Samuel, of course one of the Judges that God appointed over the people of Israel, at a point where things once again, are not really going as hoped. As Samuel reaches old age, he hands over jurisdiction to his sons, who are neither able nor popular. And so there is a revolt among the people of Israel and the elders ask Samuel to appoint a King, just as other nations have. And so we have this interesting dialogue where Samuel feels angry, and the Lord asks Samuel to listen to the people, but to prepare them for what the reality of having a King will actually mean. And then despite this rather stark warning, the people continue to petition Samuel to appoint for them a King, which he then does.

What is so key here is that although the motives of the people of Israel are so wrong, nevertheless what they are asking for is so right. And I think it shows us we have to be so careful about the way we judge characters in scripture. Because even though we can see that this is just another episode in the turbulent relationship between God and his chosen people – a relationship full of their disobedience and forgetfulness, and of God's mercy and love – despite their wrongness, God uses them. The desire for the King comes from the wrong place – they are jealous of their foreign neighbours, they want to feel they also have King to physically fight and defend them, and they have once again forgotten the promises of God, and yet in other ways they are right to assert that, ultimately, a King is who will save them.

The same sort of thing is what is occurring in our reading from John's Gospel – this interaction between Jesus and Pilate. Again, we have come to see Pilate somehow as the villain, the one under whom Jesus is sentenced to death. But Pilate's task is simply to ascertain whether or not this Jesus, this King of the Jews, poses a threat to the authority and power of the Roman Empire. His questioning leads him to the conclusion that whatever Jesus is, he does not, in a worldly sense, pose the threat that is suspected. In Pilate's eyes, Jesus is some teacher of abstract philosophy, to whom I think Pilate, in a strange way is drawn. But Pilate's decision, and conclusion makes space for the true reflection of what Jesus's Kingship means.

The people of Israel are right in wanting a King, but wrong in that they want him to win physical wars. Pilate is right to say that Jesus poses no threat to the Roman Empire, but wrong to think that he has no power. And this is where the paradox of the Kingdom of God breaks through. Christ's rule is one of gentleness, of justice, of peace, and of joy. His is an internal rule, and the seeds of his Kingdom are sown in the humblest of human hearts. He came to his own but his own did not receive him, is what we hear in the prologue to John's Gospel – Christ the King, the humble, servant King, came and dwelt among us. And his Kingdom is growing in the hearts of all believers, and we profess that we look for the coming of his Kingdom, and hold on to the hope that he will come again in glory.

Christ is the King is the one who we worship and adore not just as the infant in the manger, but as ruler and judge of all. Perhaps we can recognise along with the people of Israel our need for a King, and with Pilate the difference that Jesus is from earthly powers. But perhaps we can, by the gift of faith, come to understand the unfolding of the redemption narrative and the interweaving of Christ as King into the story of creation, and make space to ponder, to pray, and to worship the one, as the carol says, in whom, 'the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight'.

Amen