

## 24<sup>th</sup> November 2024 Christ the King

### Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe – The Feast of Christ the King

Ignore the trees and the lights, ignore the Black Friday retail enticements, ignore the supermarket aisles: it really, really isn't Christmas. This is the last Sunday of Ordinary Time. Next Sunday is Advent Sunday, which really, really isn't Christmas either, but I don't want to impose on the sermon of next week. But if you sing the words *It's beginning to look a lot like Advent* to the tune of the well-known song (which for the record is a Bing Crosby Classic and doesn't belong to Michael Bublé) you'll be more in my spirit of things.

The Feast of Christ the King is relatively a new one – in the dominion on earth – it's only a hundred year's old next year and was instituted at a time in Italy when the Pope needed to assert temporal control over the Vatican statehood. It was a political act to attempt to wrest and reclaim authority and is, in that measure a frail, transitory human effort. Yet in instituting this celebration of Christ's Divine Kingship, in a magnificent inversion we are immediately drawn away from grubby human attempts to manoeuvre and scheme and pulled into a vision and manifestation of Kingship so shatteringly bright and glorious on one hand and so very, very meek on the other that it tests our comprehension to the limit.

In the reading we had from Daniel we have the version of Kingship that humans think of, or would if they had enough imagination to dare to go that far. God the Father is shown glistening, white, gleaming, fiery, with millions and billions around him; and in phrase of pure prophesy God the Son is presented *like a human being* and is given total dominion over everything and everyone for all time – with two mentions of Kingship, it's complete, it's ultimate and it's total. It's a visionary text, the book of Daniel is a dream-sequence, full of symbols. It's also an apocalypse, looking to the end of days and the saving of the Jewish people – it's writing coincides in the second century BC with the Desecration of Altar in Jerusalem by Antiochus. Such an omnipotent vision of Kingship would appeal to a Jewish population crushed and powerless against the warring empires around it.

*To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.*

So, in contrast with these awesome words and visions in Daniel, the sequence between Jesus and Pilate in the gospel reading is painful, angular and awkward. Jesus seems almost surly and obscure, knowing his death to be inevitable, he fails to help himself by ingratiating himself with Pilate and the power of the Roman Empire. It's a seeming surrender and craven acceptance of earthly powers. It's not humility, it's lower, it's humiliation. The conspiracy against Jesus becomes complete in the next chapter of John's Gospel when Pilate pleads with the mob to not allow the crucifixion of their king and they retort that they have no king but Caesar – wow, they claim Caesar the oppressor as their king.

The dissonance between this killed king Jesus and the King of all Dominions and Time could not have been more stark for the early Christians in the immediate aftermath of the death of their leader. These first Christians would have been predominantly Jews, so would have known the texts from the book of Daniel. As a nascent religion these Christians were underground and on the run and persecuted; their Messiah hadn't seemed like the portrayal in Daniel. Yet they believed: they had enough faith to face up to power with the authority that comes from powerlessness. And it worked, it worked through love, compassion and redemption, not the typical hackneyed attributes of kingship. By any measure it was a collective miracle: soul by soul and silently the shining bounds increased. The persecuted Christians faced down the monolith of the Roman Empire. They never compromised, always preaching and praying and remaining constant, setting up churches, talking, growing, loving. Not quite three hundred years after Christ's death the Emperor Constantine – titular symbol of earthly power converted to Christianity in 312AD in the course of a battle; as the chronicler Eusebius of Caesarea put it: *About the time of the midday sun, when the day was just turning, Constantine saw with his own eyes up in the sky and resting over the sun, a cross-shaped trophy formed from light, and a text attached to it which said, "By this conquer."* Amazement at the spectacle seized both him and the

*whole company of soldiers which was then accompanying him.* From pagan to Christian, from suppression to State Religion in three hundred years.

From Daniel's revelation of Kingship to Christ's torture and death, from oppression to officialdom – in these pendulum swings of contradictions the early Church wrestled with Christ's nature and kingship.

In modern times we reference it in the Coronation Liturgy when a *child* addresses the soon to be anointed: Your Majesty, as children of the kingdom of God we welcome you in the name of the King of kings. The King replies: "In his name and after his example I come not to be served but to serve."

In the four hundreds AD, St Cyril of Alexandria tried to encapsulate it as Christ's nature is to have dominion over all and everything, but that dominion is not seized by violence nor usurped, but comes by essence and by nature. However you put it, this, Christ's nature, is really hard to think about, in technical theological language it is a hypostatic union: a unique fusion of divine and humanity in one personhood. In our typically human way, we strive to understand that; in modern speak, we try to *unpack* it. The early church went round and round it trying to unravel this mystery of human and divine, meek omnipotence and in the striving to get a glimpse of this truth, to see beyond the veil, schisms emerged as people took different positions. We can't resist the temptation as humans to get to the bottom of something, we can't help our nature as engineers wanting to get under the bonnet. But, instead we might recognise that it may be beyond us, ineffable and sublime. Perhaps a different approach on our part as humans might be to show Christ-like humility and acknowledge that this is not for us to know, as it has been said "Nothing worth knowing can be understood with the mind". We could acknowledge the wonder, the greatness, accept it and not dissect it. Let us appreciate the Kingship, be warmed by it, elevated and enabled and know too that it stems from God's incredible love for us that he should have sent his Son, as a baby, to redeem us. And that is Christmas - so must be my cue to conclude.

AMEN.