

# Are you the King of the Jews?

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*The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 25 November 2018 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker in Beverley Minster,.*

*John 18:33-37*

At the heart of this morning's Gospel reading there's a misunderstanding. A misunderstanding which I think is still very relevant and contemporary; a misunderstanding about the nature of authority and freedom. "Are you the king of the Jews?" asked Pontius Pilate of Jesus. Jesus's reply is enigmatic: "My kingdom is not from this world." And after a bit of discussion, "So you are a king" says Pilate, desperate to conclude the discussion. And Jesus replies, "Well you say so." But there is a strong sense that Jesus's understanding of kingship is very different from Pilate's, and that Jesus doesn't simply want to validate Pilate's view of what a king is, and what kind of authority a king exercises, or what kind of freedom or constraint a king's subjects might enjoy.

Pontius Pilate represents a very visible kingdom - the Roman Empire. It is protected by an army, paid for with taxes, serviced by slaves and governed by institutions, with the emperor at the top. It is what we would call the state. And states can be understood in terms of power and control, placing limits on people's freedom. Pilate knows about kings and emperors: they're are people who exercise power.

So when he asks Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?", he is not expecting a philosophical or theological discussion. He is expecting a straightforward yes or no. Pilate is a practical man; he's a busy man; he deals in facts and problems and solutions. And in any given situation he just wants to get the problems sorted and get closure. And he assumes that Jesus's understanding of kingship is much the same. He expects Jesus's answer merely to confirm what he already knows: either this man is a rival to Caesar or he's some sort of dreamer who's got caught up by the authorities in some kind of mistake. So Pilate isn't expecting to be surprised. He's not expecting to be confronted by a suggestion that power and authority and freedom might be more complicated than he had imagined.

I began by suggesting that this misunderstanding might still be relevant and contemporary. I think we're still quite muddled about what authority is really like, particularly properly constituted authority. I think we're also pretty muddled about what it is to be free, because true freedom often involves voluntarily embracing certain limitations: when we're in love, for example, we place limits upon our freedom in order to be more truly and deeply free.

And in this context I'm afraid I can't help thinking about Brexit. We've had months of argument and confusion over what it actually means. Part of the reason for that I think is an underlying confusion about what kind of freedom is it that we are most anxious about losing? We obey rules made from all sorts of different sources: from Brussels; from Westminster; from local governments; from our employers in the workplace; from the clubs and societies to which we belong. They all have rules, they all place limits on our freedom, they all have some kind of authority. Our freedom is limited also not just by rules and regulations but by the expectations of those around us: by our society; by our families; by those we love. So where does our loss of freedom actually chafe most? Where does it most matter, these limits upon our freedom?

And I do wonder sometimes that with Brexit, whether sometimes we're in danger of straining at gnats and swallowing camels. The kind of freedom that really hits us is the loss of freedom where you have to get up in the middle of the night to a crying baby; or to help your elderly spouse get to the loo. Leaving the EU isn't going to make much difference to that.

And some of our politicians, I think, have wanted to suggest that as a nation we can go our own way, make our own laws, control our own boundaries, and discover some sort of wonderful new freedom without anyone else telling us what to do and that seizing that kind of freedom is essentially very simple. And what of course we're now waking up to is that the reality isn't so simple at all: that in a globalised world, everyone is interconnected, certainly in the western democracies, and when vast amounts of capital can switch from one side of the world to another without anybody asking for a passport. The ideal of a gloriously free "island nation" just isn't really achievable in the way in which it has been talked about, certainly not without sending us back to the economic dark ages. The point being that there is more to a kingdom

than the question of who gets to make the laws. There's more to authority than the question of where you were born or where you live: ask the three million Britons who live in Europe. And there's more to a kingdom than the question of whose head is on the banknotes.

Pontius Pilate thought all of those sort of questions about what makes a king and a kingdom were straightforward and obvious, but Jesus said my kingdom is not from this world. That doesn't mean Jesus's kingdom is unreal or imaginary, or irrelevant to questions of practical politics. It simply means the source comes from somewhere else, that it has a divine origin and that it doesn't come from the Roman senate or Julius Caesar. The kingdom of Christ is run not with armies and taxes and slaves, neither is it run with MEPs and single markets and freedom of movement; it's a kingdom that fights for freedom, but it's a paradoxical kind of freedom: Jesus stands bound before Pilate. But in this encounter it's a moot point as to which of the two is most truly free and most truly in control.

The kingdom of Christ is inspired by God's generosity and love. And the reason it's a kingdom is because it's not just a private and personal matter, it's also social and political: it's about how we live as a community and as a society, not motivated by narrow self-interest, but by the desire to see people set truly free; to see suffering relieved and poverty eradicated; for justice to roll down like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream.

Faith and politics don't inhabit separate realms, and if our political views are not shaped and informed by our faith, then they will be informed by something else which may turn out to be quite incompatible with our faith. And the early Christians understood that: they knew that if Jesus was Lord, Caesar certainly wasn't, and they were prepared to stand up for that. And if you believe in God, your country and your family, just be very careful what order you put them in, because whatever you put first will capture your soul.

This feast of Christ the King is not actually that old. It only began in 1925 inaugurated by Pope Pius the 11th. And at that time the world was still recovering from the chaos and loss of life caused by the First World War. Mussolini had been in power in Italy for three years already; in Germany, Hitler's National Socialist Party was on the rise;

the world economy was in the doldrums; atheism was fashionable; all sorts of nationalisms were on the rise - so far so different!

And at such a time the Pope asserted that nevertheless, despite the rise of new dictators and false values, Christ was king of the universe: a kingdom not from this world, but one which Christ embodied; a kingdom shaped by the authority of self-giving love; a kingdom not just for individuals, but for communities and nations and ultimately for the whole world; a kingdom whose way is the cross and whose goal is the new creation; a kingdom whose authority and rule we are invited to recognise, because its authority is not oppressive, but sets us free.

This kingdom will outlast all others, because the kingdom of Christ in the end, is the kingdom of love; it is the king kingdom which we are invited to join; it is the Kingdom which nourishes us around the Lord's table this morning; it is the kingdom that shapes us and makes us who we most truly are, and restores to us our authentic humanity - just as that bound figure before the ruler, was more human than the one who held what appeared to be the real power.