

# Christ the King ...

## *... the just and gentle ruler*

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*The sermon given by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, at Evensong on 24 November 2019, in Beverley Minster.*

*1 Samuel 8:4-20; John 18:33-37*

This theme of Christ the King challenges us. What do we mean when we say the Christ is King?

The Old Testament passage shows the Israelites asking for a king and being warned by the prophet Samuel that if they have a king it will end badly – kings are inherently oppressive – he will make your sons fight in armies and farm his land, make your daughters serve as cooks and maids in palaces; he will take the best of your land and livestock and tax the rest and in effect you will become his slaves.

But the Israelites still want a king. Why? Because they want ‘strong leadership’: someone to think for them; someone to lead them in battle; someone to make them successful and feel good about themselves. Perhaps also because they want to be like everyone else – ‘We are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.’

Still today we can see a pretty straight line between strong leadership and oppression. We understand the prophet’s republicanism. So the idea of Jesus as King may not resonate very strongly.

But the theme of Christ the King still challenges us. It invites us to reflect on who or what is our ruler? We may think of ourselves as free citizens, able to do whatever we like under the law, but in reality we are not as free as we think. What are the things that you submit to, that you follow and offer yourself up to? Chances are that the things which rule our lives most are our own inner desires and instincts and lusts – and what a chaotic and tyrannical bunch of dictators they are!

So who or what is going to exercise authority over our unruly human nature? Who or what is going to show us how to live well? Who or what is going to rehabilitate us when we fail and let others down? We human beings are not very good at redeeming ourselves; change generally only happens when we make ourselves accountable to someone else, be it a parent, teacher, manager, spouse or life coach.

The feast of Christ the King was introduced by the Roman Catholic Church in the 1920s by Pope Pius XI partly as a response to the rise of fascism. The false authority claimed by dictators and ideologies, the authority that demanded subservience and crushed individual freedom was confronted by the authority of Christ the King – a different kind of authority, a different kind of rule, a different kind of kingdom.

‘My Kingdom is not of this world’ says Jesus to Pilate. ‘My Kingdom is not from here.’ Whatever authority Jesus has, its source lies from outside this world. It’s not a human creation or the result of human ambition or effort or power. So none of this world’s rulers or powers can take Jesus’s authority from him.

The theme of Christ the King challenges us because the place where Christ’s kingship is revealed is on the cross. Calvary is his throne. There he is displayed to the world under the banner – ‘*This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*’. This is a very strange kind of royalty, revealed in a Roman kangaroo court. A strange kind of power, revealed in suffering and death. It doesn’t depend on coercion and force; it isn’t enforced by secret policemen and battalions of tanks. It is rather the power of love – a power which reveals itself in faithfulness, in God’s commitment to his world, in Jesus standing alongside us in our weakness and mortality. It is the power not to get everything right and bend the world to our will, but the power of forgiveness, to heal and transform where we have failed and gone wrong.

Christ the King does not force himself upon us; his rule is the rule of self-giving love, so when we acknowledge him as our King, and when we sign up to follow him in the power and authority of that love, it will make us more human, not less.

Pilate didn’t understand that kind of kingship, because it doesn’t involve physical strength. It’s a rule to which we are invited to submit freely and of our own will, knowing that in serving such a King we find the secret of true freedom. Christ the

King can save us from that false and empty freedom that leaves so many feeling dissatisfied and frustrated. The rule of Christ the King brings a proper order into our lives – the order of grace, of unconditional love – as we hand over our self-destructive instincts and embrace his pattern of discipline and holiness, surrendering ourselves to the regime of love.

On this feast of Christ the King there is a challenge for us which is also an invitation – to live more fully under the rule of Christ, to allow his good order to shape our lives, to set us free from our unruly demons whom we have allowed to seize control.

There is also a challenge to us as Christians to live as citizens of Christ's Kingdom, a Kingdom of peace and righteousness and truth, to model relationships based on respect and trust, to challenge the unjust structures causing many to live in poverty and fear, to tread more lightly upon the earth which we share with all humanity.

In this time of electioneering there are many false utopias being offered. As citizens of Christ's Kingdom we should be able to see through them, to recognise the importance of values ultimately not from this world, and to commit ourselves to demonstrate not just the reality but the benefit of his just and gentle rule.

## Reading Texts

Samuel 1 8:4-20

<sup>4</sup> Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, <sup>5</sup> and said to him, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations." <sup>6</sup> But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to the Lord, <sup>7</sup> and the Lord said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. <sup>8</sup> Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. <sup>9</sup> Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them." <sup>10</sup> So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. <sup>11</sup> He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; <sup>12</sup> and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. <sup>13</sup> He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. <sup>14</sup> He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. <sup>15</sup> He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. <sup>16</sup> He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. <sup>17</sup> He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. <sup>18</sup> And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day." <sup>19</sup> But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, "No! but we are determined to have a king over us, <sup>20</sup> so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles."

John 18:33-37

<sup>33</sup> Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" <sup>34</sup> Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or

did others tell you about me?" <sup>35</sup> Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" <sup>36</sup> Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." <sup>37</sup> Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."