

# Christ the King

---

*A sermon given on the Festival of Christ the King, the Sunday next before Advent, 20th November 2022 – by Revd Canon Peter Wadsworth, in Beverley Minster*

***Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad, let them say among themselves, "The Lord reigns"***, as Chronicles puts it.

So why do we keep a festival which is less than 100 years old, established by a pope in seemingly very different circumstances? Well, two reasons, really. The first, quite simply, is it gives us a really strong 'full stop' on this last church's year. It says something very powerful about the real, true order of things. And also, and more deeply, it allows us to reorient ourselves in a very uncertain and often threatening world: this has been the year when we have seen COVID continue; when we've seen war in Europe on a massive scale; when we've been faced with political turmoil; and pressure on all our lives. So actually the world is not really very different from the world of 1925. Let me quote you some words, some lines from one of the great Irish poets, W B Yeats, who was roughly contemporary with Pius XI, and see whether you recognise anything of the present situation in these words from over a century ago:

*Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.*

I think it's just as accurate of today as it was then. So, in a world which is often frightening, uncertain, where old certainties have been undermined from the highest levels of governments and nations, right down to our own day to day lives, where are we to put our trust and our faith? Well, this feast says we put it in Christ the King. And if you think about it, the Bible and our hymns are absolutely packed with that imagery - the hymns we're singing this morning: Christ is King, let earth rejoice; Jesus shall reign; or that very popular modern one, Christ the Servant King. And the Psalms and the New Testament are full of imagery of the Kingship of God, the Kingship of Christ, Christ as our rock, our stronghold, our hiding place in time of trouble against our enemies.

So is it just, then, thinking of Christ as a way of seeing ourselves through hard times, of just grinning and bearing the world as it is, until some future moment when, as we pray each time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray, 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done' - is it just a promise of jam in heaven tomorrow?

Well, the answer to that is no, it's not. Because if we look at the language of Christ's Kingdom in the New Testament, we will see that there are two strands to it. One strand is the strand of the final consummation of all things when Christ comes again as King, the Second Coming - as words that are used in the Messiah, which was sung here last night, 'The kingdom of this world has become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever.' - words of the last book of the Bible, book of Revelation.

And we do not know when that final end will come, or indeed how it will come. And I have to tell you that it's a mug's game trying to guess the date; people have been doing that for centuries. Even St Paul in his earliest letters, to the Thessalonians, thought that it would come very quickly within the life-time of some of those that he was writing to. But it didn't. Indeed, our New Testament is a product of the fact that the church had to face the fact in the late first century that the end was not coming quickly or as quickly as they thought, and that they would have to have some record of what Jesus had taught and did and the story of the death and resurrection. And Jesus himself warned against trying to predict the end. And those who have done so ever since have always come unstuck. In this particular part of the world, one of the times when this sort of speculation was at its highest was during the Viking invasions in the 9th and 10th centuries. My favourite story on the whole business of trying to predict the end is one that happened about 20 years ago, when an American sect declared with great confidence that the end of the world was coming within the next couple of years, they said. But somehow their credibility got slightly undermined when it was leaked that they had just signed a new 999 year lease on their headquarters building. We don't know when the final culmination will be and we don't know what form it will take.

But in the New Testament there is another strand about the kingdom, quite a subtly different one. And that's the idea that the kingdom is not just some event way off there in the future, but that the kingdom is something which can happen now. That the kingdom is wherever God reigns in people's lives, in the world as it is. And Jesus often talks about the kingdom being close: to the man who responds very wisely to the question of what is the greatest commandment, Jesus says, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." So the kingdom is something close. And we can celebrate the kingdom not just as an event to happen way beyond our own lifetimes (in all probability) but as something which is being

established now, wherever God is honoured and his people are served: the Kingdom of God exists in our food banks; the Kingdom of God was present on Friday night, when despite the hard times, still a vast sum of £35 million plus was raised for 'Children in need'; the Kingdom of God is present in those seeking to protect our environment; those seeking justice and peace in our world, sometimes even at great personal risk. Wherever such things happen, wherever people respond in that way, there is the seed at least of the kingdom of God. And it always even comes down, even further down to the micro level of each one of our lives: whenever we as disciples of Christ are faithful to our calling; in our dealings with people; in our dealings with the world - we are helping to build that kingdom. And it may come down to something as trivial, for instance, in the next few weeks as being saying a kind word and a smile for those who are super-busy in our shops.

But the kingdom as it is established now is always fragile. Signs of the kingdom can be snuffed out very easily. As Jesus says in Matthew, "From the days of John the Baptist until now, the Kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violence take it by force." Jesus is realistic about the world as it is. But the kingdom goes on being established - if it is snuffed out in one place, the flame of it is relit somewhere else and always has been.

And we are people created and called to be builders of God's Kingdom. And of course it is a kingdom of service. You may sometimes see crosses with the figure of Christ as king on them (you may say, "Well, that's a bit strange - it's not how I think of a crucifix" - and of course it's symbolic only) and by showing a crowned, robed Christ, but still with hands outstretched on the cross, it says, "Yes, this is a servant kingship." And that's the kingship which we are called upon to exercise, following Christ in his footsteps, in his teachings and in his actions. And, as he assures us, the Kingdom, the Church will prevail and the gates of hell can never destroy it.