

# Earthly Actions ...

## *... have Heavenly Consequences*

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*A sermon given on the Festival of Christ the King, 26th November 2023 by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster*

*Matthew 25:31-end*

So today is the feast of Christ the King. What exactly does that mean? Well, we can think about it in a variety of ways, but the approach I want to take is to think of it as the final part of the season of All Saints. All Saints Day was the 1 November and was the festival when we thought about the church on Earth being part of the communion of Saints in Heaven. And in a more general sense, we think about the relationship between Heaven and Earth and how these are not unrelated realms, but that God promises to renew both Heaven and Earth and bring them together.

And in the same way, Jesus is the King of both Heaven and Earth, but his kingship on Earth is far from obvious; nevertheless, it is real. When Jesus was crucified, the charge sheet fixed to the cross over his head read 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.' And calling Jesus 'The Christ'; 'The Messiah' - was a royal title, as is the title 'Son of God.' And these are titles which we see being tried out across the Gospels, with people repeatedly asking, 'Is this the one?' 'Is this the Messiah, the King?' 'Is this really the King of Israel, the one everyone was hoping would bring in the Kingdom of God. And it was a difficult question because Jesus didn't look like a king. He wore no crown until forced to wear a crown of thorns. He wasn't born in a palace and he didn't wear any royal robes. He commanded no armies, he headed no human government. But he did announce God's kingdom. And in some ways he did behave as a legislator, giving his disciples a new commandment that they should love one another. And he did act with authority: authority to teach about God's kingdom; authority to heal; authority to forgive; authority to drive out demons; authority even to calm the wind and the waves; authority over creation itself. And in these ways, he behaved like even more than a king. But he didn't look like one of the kings of the Earth. Perhaps he demonstrates on Earth what a kingdom of Heaven might look like. And in particular, he shows what it might look like when the kingdom of Heaven and the kingdom of Earth come together.

But the kingship of Jesus looks different on Earth than it does in Heaven. It's a bit like Rubik's clock. I don't know if you remember these. This was the follow-up to Rubik's Cube. It has two sides and on each side there are nine clock faces and there are switches on the side that move the clock hands. And the idea is you have to get all 18 clock hands, so nine on each side. You have to get them all up at the midday position. The problem is that the hands, when you move the switches, the hands on one side of the puzzle are different from the hands on the other side. So the same switches move a different combination of clock hands on each side of the puzzle. And so it drives you absolutely crazy, because if you focus on one side of the puzzle, you make a complete mess of the other side. The two sides are connected, but they are not identical. And in the same way, Heaven and Earth are connected, but they're not identical. So a cross on Earth is a throne in Heaven, a King in Heaven is a servant on Earth, a stranger on Earth is a welcome guest in Heaven. It's all a bit upside down, but it's still connected.

And that, I think, is what we're seeing going on in this morning's gospel reading: the Son of Man comes in his glory as a king. So straight away, Jesus the wandering teacher on Earth is revealed as the King in his glory. And he says to the nations lined up in front of him, *"Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you gave me clothing; I was sick and you took care of me."* And the righteous say, well when did we do all these things for you? We weren't aware that we were serving a great king when we were here on Earth. And the King says, *"Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."* And conversely, those who are accursed and sent away into darkness, suffer that fate because they have failed to give the King food, drink, clothing, care and so on. And they say, *"Lord, when did we see you hungry and not help you?"* And the King says, *"Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."*

In other words, Heaven and Earth are linked. Our treatment of people here on Earth is mirrored in Heaven and Jesus receives it as treatment offered to him. But when you or I feed the hungry or welcome the stranger here on Earth, often we don't realise that it's Jesus we are serving. So what I take away from that is that Earthly actions have Heavenly consequences. But they're not always obvious. You may think you're only buying a copy of 'The Big Issue' or passing the time of day with some lonely person on a park bench, but actually, you may in fact be serving the King. Likewise, you may be tempted to think it doesn't matter if you turn a blind eye to someone in need, you might think that somebody else is better placed to help. But in fact, you may be spurning the King himself.

Christ the King is not like Earthly kings: he comes amongst us incognito, like Shakespeare's Henry V on the night before Agincourt, going around the camp in disguise, encouraging his men. We don't know how close the King is, but we can be sure that he is not very far away.

And we acknowledge the King not by queuing up for thrones of our own, but by recognising that his kingdom is already in our midst; that our Earthly actions have Heavenly consequences which may not always be obvious; and by recognising that the service we offer to our fellow human beings, Jesus will accept and honour as service rendered to him.

# Reading Text

## Matthew 25:31-end

<sup>31</sup> 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup> and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. <sup>34</sup> Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup> And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" <sup>40</sup> And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." <sup>41</sup> Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." <sup>44</sup> Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" <sup>45</sup> Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." <sup>46</sup> And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'

## Discussion Points / Points to Ponder:

1. How does the sermon interpret the concept of Christ the King and relate it to the season of All Saints? What insights does this perspective offer?
2. The sermon emphasises the dual nature of Jesus as King on both Earth and in Heaven. In what ways does the earthly kingship of Jesus differ from traditional notions of kingship, and how does this connect to his actions during his time on Earth?
3. The analogy of the Rubik's clock is used to describe the connection between Heaven and Earth. How effective is this analogy in conveying the idea that the two realms are connected but not identical? Are there other analogies or metaphors that could help illustrate this concept?
4. The gospel reading in the sermon focuses on the actions of feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, and caring for the sick. How does the text challenge our understanding of serving Christ through these acts of kindness, especially when the righteous seem unaware of their service to the King?
5. The sermon suggests that Earthly actions have Heavenly consequences, even if those consequences are not always obvious. Can you think of personal experiences where you may have unknowingly served a deeper purpose through seemingly ordinary actions?
6. The sermon concludes by emphasising the incognito nature of Christ the King, likening it to Shakespeare's Henry V on the night before Agincourt. How does this perspective influence the way we perceive and respond to the presence of Christ in our lives and in the lives of those around us?

# Sermon Summary: "Earthly Actions Have Heavenly Consequences"

- Feast of Christ the King:
  - Reflection on All Saints' season, connecting Heaven and Earth, renewing both realms.
- Jesus as the King:
  - Kingship not obvious on Earth, despite being King of both realms.
  - Titles ('The Christ,' 'Son of God') attributed, yet Jesus didn't resemble a typical king.
- Actions Reflecting Kingship:
  - Jesus announced God's kingdom, issued new commandments, showed authority over various aspects (teaching, healing, nature).
  - Demonstrated a kingdom of Heaven on Earth.
- Differences Between Earthly & Heavenly Kingship:
  - Comparison to Rubik's clock: connected but not identical.
  - Earth and Heaven connected but showcase differences in perception and action.
- Gospel Reading Interpretation:
  - Son of Man revealed in glory, referencing acts of kindness towards the needy as acts towards the King.
  - Earthly actions towards others mirrored in Heaven; serving others is akin to serving Jesus.
- Christ the King's Presence:
  - King's presence often incognito; acknowledging his kingdom's existence within Earthly actions.
  - Recognising service to fellow humans as service to Jesus.
- Main Point:
  - Earthly actions hold Heavenly consequences, often unrecognised.
  - Serving others equates to serving the King; neglecting those in need spurns the King.