

Christ the King

St. Brandon's

Daniel 7:9-10,13-14; Revelation 1:4-8; John 18:33-37

25th November 2018

How's your Christmas pudding coming along? How many of you have already made it / them? How many of you are planning to buy yours (shame on you!). And how many of you, on this stir-up Sunday, are planning to do it when you get home, as you should? And, I hope you know that you should stir the mixture from East to West in honour of the three wise men (though quite how you do that, I have no idea!). And how did the tradition come about in the first place? Well possibly from Germany via George I in 1724, or maybe via Prince Albert in Victorian times.

But, of course, as well as stir-up Sunday, today is also the feast of Christ the King. Where did that come from? Well, that's later than Christmas puddings and stir-up Sunday – it was originally instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925, and used to be celebrated on the last Sunday in October, immediately prior to the Feast of All Saints. But in 1969 Pope Paul VI moved it to the final Sunday of the liturgical year (i.e. today) and amended the title to be the Feast of our Lord Jesus Christ King of the Universe (just in case you were in any doubt how far His kingship extended!). By choosing this date, which most Anglicans now follow and most Catholics (though not if you're a Catholic who observes the extraordinary form of the Roman Rite with the General Roman Calendar of 1960, of course!), the emphasis on the eschatological importance of this Sunday is made clearer. In plain English, that means that as we come to the end of the Church's year today (the end of Ordinary Time and all those Sundays after Trinity), we focus on the end times, and on Christ as consummating, bringing to an end and reconciling, all things.

And that's clear particularly from our readings from Daniel and Revelation. In Daniel we have "one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven" (as the angels say after the Ascension in Acts 1), who is presented to the Ancient One (God the Father) and is "given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him", a dominion that will never be destroyed. And, of course, we take that as a prophecy about Jesus.

And that's picked up in Revelation where we're again told that Christ is coming with the clouds and is the ruler of the kings of the earth – a subversive claim that Jesus was and is the real ruler of the world, despite all appearances to the contrary. So one thing for sure is that the Feast of Christ the King is a statement and claim about God's ultimate victory over all peoples and all things.

But, our gospel reading then sets this in a rather different light. Here is Christ the King, but hardly having dominion over all things. It's Pilate, representative of the Emperor and therefore of the supreme human power, at least in that part of the world at that time, who is clearly in control. Or is he? Who is interviewing who here? Who is the real king? Which kingdom has the real, the ultimate power? And, of course, they're almost trick questions because in a way Pilate and Jesus are talking past one another. Jesus is reluctant to claim kingship, not because He isn't a king or is afraid of the consequences of saying so, but because He knows He will be misunderstood. Yes, he's a king, it's just that it isn't that kind of kingdom that he's king over. It's a kingdom which is *in* the world, but not *of* it; it is *here*, but it is not *from* here (St. Augustine). So, His followers won't fight for Him (at least they've got that far in their understanding). He could appeal to His Father who would immediately send Him twelve legions of angels (Matthew 26:53), but again that's not the point of the kind of kingdom over which He is king. And ultimately, as we know, Jesus submits Himself to suffering and death, and is then vindicated through His resurrection and ascension, before He claims, on terms which are fitting to who He is, who God is, the dominion that is actually His by right.

So at the end of the liturgical year we acknowledge the claim that Christ is the king of the universe, we anticipate that He will in due course receive the dominion and glory that is His due, while recognising that His kingdom is not of this world, that it is not based on the power and violence of earthly kingdoms.

Well, that's all very well, but how then might we use all of that during the course, at least, of this week before Advent and the beginning of the new liturgical year next Sunday? Well Pope Pius XI who, you may recall, instituted the Feast in 1925, wanted it particularly to impact the laity. He wrote this:

"If to Christ our Lord is given all power in heaven and on earth; if all men [sorry – this was 1925, just before women were invented, as you'll know], purchased by his precious blood, are by a new right subjected to his dominion; if this power embraces all men [people], it must be clear that not one of our faculties is exempt from his empire. He must reign in our minds, which should assent with perfect submission and firm belief to revealed truths and to the doctrines of Christ. He must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God. He must reign in our hearts, which should spurn natural desires and love God above all things, and cleave to him alone. He must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments for the interior sanctification of our souls, or to use the words of the Apostle Paul, as instruments of justice unto God."

Gosh! But what he was saying is that we should use this feast by way of recommitting ourselves – mind, will, heart, body – to Christ the King. And this way of using the feast perhaps links to the idea of judgment, that if we don't recommit ourselves we will quite naturally come under judgment. The setting for our reading from Daniel was like a law court – "the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened". Are our names written in the book of life? What might we need to do by way of working out our faith to ensure that they are?

But I think there are other ways of using this feast. So instead of, or as well as, using it for reflection, penitence and recommitment, we might use it for prayer for others. We've already done that in praying the collect for today, but it bears repeating at this point: "Eternal Father, whose son Jesus Christ ascended to the throne of heaven that he might rule over all things as Lord and King: keep the Church in the unity of the Spirit and in the bond of peace, and bring the whole created order to worship at his feet." It wouldn't be difficult, given all that's going on in the Church and the world, to spend the whole week praying for the Church and the world while holding the vision of Christ the King before us as we do so.

But I think there is a third way of using this feast. It is a feast after all. So surely this isn't just about acknowledging the claim that Christ is the king of the universe, but celebrating the truth within that. Christ is coming with the clouds; every eye will see Him; all things will be put under His feet. Surely we can say with Revelation: "to him who loves us [a fundamental part of, indeed the whole basis of the kingdom which God in Christ establishes] and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen!" Let's celebrate this feast, this truth.

And, of course, one way of celebrating that would be with a glass or two of sherry while stirring up a Christmas pudding!

Amen