

Christ the King

St. Brandon's

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Col.1:11-20; Luke 23:33-44

24th November 2019

Well we've done it! All those 'Sundays after Trinity' (all that so-called *Ordinary Time* from the day after Pentecost), then a few Sundays before Advent, and now here we are on the cusp of the Church's New Year – it's Advent Sunday next week (which, of course, means fewer shopping days to Christmas than you'd like to think).

And while the Church doesn't do 'old year passing - new year coming' at a single moment, it nonetheless marks the end of the old year with a festival: Christ the King, the "crown of the liturgical year" as Pope Francis has called it, the pun being deliberate presumably.

Having said that, and I don't know about you, but I find 'King' not instinctively an easy term. That's partly because, for us, it has largely passed out of usage, and partly because it has ceremonial connotations which acknowledge that real power actually lies elsewhere. So while our wonderful Queen Elizabeth does a great job within the confines of her office (we won't mention other members of the royal family, of course), we all know that she couldn't prevent the proroguing of parliament, just as an example. So would 'Prime Minister' be any better? Or 'Mayor'? Or 'President'? Surely not!

So perhaps our best bet is to live with 'King', but then try to provide some other words with it that might help us to understand what kind of king we are talking about when we refer to Christ the King. So, here's an exercise for you to do in twos or threes. Looking at the three main readings – from Jeremiah, Colossians and Luke – come up with some adjectives that could go before the word king. So, for example, a nice king – except that 'nice' would be wrong! And just a note that, while most will be single words (like nice, but not nice), you might find some that need more than one word, or a string of words run together, like a world-beating king, except that would probably be wrong too! And just to let you know, I've found 19 though there may be more, the longest of which has six hyphenated words, so see if you can beat that!

Jeremiah

A shepherd King (Jesus takes this specifically to refer to Himself – "I am the good shepherd" John 10:11)

A wise King

A just King

A righteous King (someone who makes things as they were meant to be)

Colossians

A creator King ("for in Him all things in heaven and on earth were created")

A before-all-things King

An in-him-all-things-hold-together King (that's my six)

A head-of-the-Church King

A first-place-in-everything King

An all-the-fullness-of-God King

A reconciler-of-all-things King

A peace-making King

Luke

A crucified King (the paradox of Christ being enthroned, as you would expect of a king, but on a cross, rather than, or perhaps as well as, ascending to the throne of heaven as our Collect put it)

A sacrificed King

A forgiving King

A mocked King

An innocent King

A with-you King (or we might say an approachable king even in extremis, as the second criminal found)

An off-to-Paradise King

Does that help to fill out what kind of king we are talking about when we talk of Christ the King? And one thing that's worth noting about this is just the sheer range of descriptions that we've come up with. Christ is a king who operates at the personal level – a with-you King, an approachable King, a forgiving King. This is sometimes referred to as 'immanence' – the idea of a God who manifests Himself in history and in the lives of people in both mundane and dramatic ways. But at the other end of the scale, He is a 'transcendent' King, a before-all-things King, a creator King, a reconciling King who is wholly other in the sense that He is unlike His creation, a King who stands above and beyond the fallen created order, as one who is perfectly holy. So there is this remarkable paradox as Christ the King holds together the transcendent and the immanent. We might almost say He is the "maker-of-the-stars-and-sea-become-a-child-on-earth-for-me King (13 hyphenated words!). And, in between, transcendence and immanence, as it were, He is a King who establishes justice and peace, a wise King, in other words a King who sets the standards by which things will be judged. And, of course, He is also a King who is unlike most earthly kings – a king who is willing to sacrifice Himself for our sakes, a self-sacrificing King who is mocked and crucified.

If, then, we have a much better understanding of Christ the King, what then? And in Luke's gospel there are three sets of people who have different reactions to the Christ, with the title King of the Jews over His head, that they see before them. First, there is the response of "the people" who "stood by, watching". Are we too tempted to keep our distance from Jesus' kingship – to not accept completely the scandal of His humble and self-sacrificing love, which perhaps unsettles and disturbs us? Then there are "the leaders", presumably the religious leaders who, together with the first criminal, jeer at Him: "If you are the Messiah, save yourself". They are almost tempting Him, as Satan tempted Him in the wilderness, to show His superiority in wonder-working or by force. Perhaps we long for a king who will prove himself beyond all doubt, who will establish his throne by force, and have done with all the evil in the world. But that seems not to be Jesus' way. Indeed, from all that we have seen about the kind of king Jesus is, we might also be able to say that He is a non-violent King.

So what of the third set of people? Well, this set of people is represented by the second criminal, though there were of course other disciples present. For the second criminal, suffering on the cross alongside what he has come to realise is his innocent Lord, he recognises that, in Christ, a different kind of glory is being made manifest, and a different kind of victory is being won.¹ And he cries out, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom".

¹ Some of the material in this latter section is taken from Angus Ritchie in the Church Times, 22 November 2019. He in turn cites Pope Francis, but gives no reference to his source.

So this final festival of the Church's year doesn't really allow us to stand back, but rather demands of us a response. Which of the three sets of people best describes me? Do I stand by and watch? Do I long for a wonder-working King who will just come and sort it all out? Or am I with the second criminal, and does that, at the closing of the Church's year, draw me into a deeper life of worship and discipleship, as I enthrone Christ the King as the Lord of my life?

Amen.