

This is the final Sunday of the current Church year - the festival of Christ the King which means that next Sunday heralds the start of Advent and the countdown to Christmas in earnest just 27 days later!

But let's push the pause button for a moment and give due consideration to this particular festival – that of Christ the King, because, from time to time, it's good to stop and examine the scale of our vision of God. I have previously spoken about our personal image of God which is never big enough and I suspect that for many of us God is a worthwhile accessory, a family-sized, flat-packed, easy-assembly deity, one that doesn't interfere too much with our plans or ask too many questions of our lifestyle and enables us to get on with the serious business of living.

John, the author of Revelation, will have none of that. The God whose greetings he sends to the seven churches is the One 'who is and who was and who is to come', whose seven spirits are before his throne, whose Christ is 'the firstborn' of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth'. Indeed, he is the Alpha and the Omega who encompasses the entirety of history, past, present and future. Now, does that quite fit your image of God? If you just think about those words, you don't need me to tell you that that God is definitely not going to fit your image of a flat-packed, easy-assembly deity! Let me just repeat them because they are a bit of challenge -. The God whose greetings he sends to the seven churches is the One 'who is and who was and who is to come', whose seven spirits are before his throne, whose Christ is 'the firstborn' of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth'. Indeed, he is the Alpha and the Omega who encompasses the entirety of history, past, present and future.

What difference would it make to our worship on Sundays if we took with us this vision of the sheer scale, the terrifying beauty, the heart-stopping vastness of that uncontainable Mystery we have the audacity to name 'God' (as if we knew)? The writer Anne Dillard says that when we come to worship: "we should all be wearing crash helmets. Sidesmen should issue life-preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews....." Wow, now that's an image to take away!

And yet, astonishingly, this God loves us and sets us free and has made us to be a kingdom, priests to serve him. Aren't these powerful images the ones that should be the foundation of our faith and the inspiration of our days?

If you think that Revelation reading is amazing enough we now consider our reading from Daniel. I find the style of the two books reflect each other; mysterious imagery abounds in both. Through stories and visions the book of Daniel explores a question that is no less difficult and troubling for us as for its original readers: who truly rules the universe? Our lives as people of faith depend on the answer.

The language of Daniel 7 is symbolic. It draws on the myths of other nations as well as the traditions of Israel. The 'beasts' represent the powers that have ruled over Judea: Babylon, Persia and Greece. It is likely that the original readers of the book of Daniel were living under the rule of the Greek Antiochus IV, who was particularly arbitrary and brutal. Being a Jew and staying alive became a minefield of negotiation and danger.

All is not lost though. The Ancient One is still on his heavenly throne and in his courtroom, justice is still done. Before him stands one in human form who is given delegated authority over the world. Who is it? Christian readers inevitably see here the figure of Christ. The ancient text is, however, enigmatic. It tells us that all human kingdoms will ultimately fall before God's kingdom and that God will share his rule with a representative of humanity. Even now we cannot know how and when the tyranny of evil will be overthrown, but Daniel encourages us to believe that day will come.

Finally, turning to our Gospel reading in this scene in John, an intense human and spiritual drama plays out behind locked doors. Outside, nationalist feeling is running high. Pilate, political animal that he was, alert to potential disturbance during the Passover, must maintain relations with the temple authorities while upholding Roman law and his own position.

The Jews want Pilate to put Jesus to death. An irony that swirls around John's telling of this scene is that the Jews are tacitly acknowledging the kingship of Caesar in order to be rid of their true King, Jesus. As far as the Romans are concerned, the case will centre on the political charge, *lèse majesté* (treason) against Rome, and not any charge of blasphemy. Jesus answers the question on kingship with a qualified, "you

have said so" which implies "what you have said is correct, but I would not give it the connotation you intend." John clarifies this ambiguity by reporting Jesus' careful explanation of his kingship. There is a distinction between the Gentile political understanding of the kingship of the Jews and the Jewish religious understanding whereby God is king of Israel. Jesus explains to Pilate that his kingdom is not a political one. The purpose of the incarnation (God made man) is better understood in terms of testifying to the truth – a testimony that constitutes judgement for Pilate who seeks to avoid it.

Our sense of the private interchange between Jesus and Pilate depends on tone of voice as they parry questions with questions. Jesus' reply to Pilate's first question takes up the subject and introduces doubt into Pilate's mind – 'on your own' challenges Pilate to move beyond expediency and reveal what he personally thinks. Jesus reframes the encounter, establishing that kingship has a meaning beyond the politics of the Roman world. Jesus is able to draw Pilate to the heart of the matter. Pilate doesn't understand and doesn't want to understand the ins and outs of the odd ways (as they seemed to him) in which the Jews organise their lives. But he knows what Kings are, where they come from and how they behave. And he knows that his job is not to allow such things on his patch. So out he comes with it "are you the King of the Jews?" The idea is, of course, so laughable that he knows within his own frame of reference what the answer is. He sees before him a poor man from the wrong part of the country. He has a small band of followers and they've all run away. Of course, he's not the king. But.....maybe he thinks he is. Maybe he's really deluded. Better ask him and find out! Pilate discovers as many discovered before him and many have since, that when you ask Jesus a question the answer is likely to be another question. Where is the suggestion coming from? Who put the idea into your head? Pilate waves this away. Don't expect me to understand you peculiar Jews. You must have done something wrong to be here before me!

Jesus' answer is both apparently incriminating and deeply revealing. His kingdom, yes he does agree he has a kingdom and Pilate seizes on this, doesn't come from this world. It's not 'other worldly' or a spiritual or heavenly reality though that has nothing to do with the present world. Jesus taught his disciples to pray that God's kingdom would come 'on earth as in heaven' and we shouldn't lose sight of that. Jesus' kingdom does not come *from* 'this world'. John has written repeatedly in his gospel that this world is the source of evil and rebellion against God. Jesus is denying that his kingdom has a this-worldly *origin* or *quality*. He is not denying that it has a this-worldly *destination*. That is why he has come into the world himself. "for this I was born" and this is the reason why he has sent and will send his followers into the world. His kingdom doesn't come from this world but it is for this world. That is the crucial distinction that we need to appreciate. As Jesus points out, if his kingdom were the common or garden variety his followers would fight to stop him being handed over. They did try and had to be restrained by Jesus; Peter needed to learn the lesson Jesus was now teaching Pilate and it would take nothing less than the resurrection to get it through to him. But Jesus is indeed claiming to be a king even though not of the variety we are used to. This is why he had to come in the first place.

Jesus was in fact speaking and bringing the truth. Truth isn't something we find in a test-tube nor is it a mathematical formula nor is it a truth that is relative to something else. We don't have truth in our pockets and it is not owned by philosophers or judges. It is a gift, a strange quality that, like Jesus' kingdom in fact comes from elsewhere but is meant to take up residence in this world. Jesus has come to give evidence about this truth and this truth is Jesus himself.

Pilate, how could he start to understand what Jesus was saying. His experience of Kings and Kingdoms were most definitely from a this-worldly perspective. It's the truth found out of the barrel of a gun. Political 'truth'; my truth against your truth, my sword against your sword. And ultimately, for a Roman governor, my truth against your truth, my power against your weakness, my cross to hang your naked body on. Ultimately, somehow through the cynicism, the casual local custom, the misunderstandings, the distortions, the plots and schemes and betrayals and denials, the Truth stands there in person, taking the death that would otherwise have fallen on a brigand.

Pilate didn't see it at the time. Even cunning Caiaphas probably didn't appreciate the irony of the point. But John wants us to see it. This is what the cross will mean. This is what truth is and does. Truth is what Jesus is; and Jesus is dying for Barrabas and for Israel and for the world. And for you and me.

As we ask Pilate's question of Jesus ourselves, 'are you the King of the Jews?', we face the same challenge he did. He is a king who calls us to face the truth. Do we accept or reject his kingship? All future decisions will be made in the light of that choice.

Amen