**A sermon for celebration of Christ the King**

We have reached the final Sunday of the Church Year! Next week, Advent Sunday and the whole journey starts afresh, moving from Lectionary year C to Lectionary year A. We will set aside the Gospel of Luke to that of Matthew.

Each of us has our own feast day generally called our birthday, a day when we celebrate our lives, perhaps simply the fact we are still alive, a day when our family and friends remember us with cards, a message or present. I enjoy the day but not the number I have reached. I particularly enjoy celebrating with my family and the fact that is increasingly hijacked by grandchildren happy to enjoy it on my behalf.

Today, we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King. We celebrate Christ, risen, ascended and glorified. The occasion to give special recognition to the dominion Christ our Lord has over all aspects of our lives and for the difference Jesus makes to our lives.

The actual Feast is a relative newcomer to the church calendar, promulgated by Pope Pius XI in 1922 and originally celebrated on the final Sunday in October but then shifted to the final Sunday of the church year in 1970 so as to emphasise even more strongly the connection between Christ’s kingship and His second advent (coming) to judge the world. So, a church year that starts in the hope of the birth of the Messiah ends with the proclamation of his universal sovereignty.

Another, informal name by which this final Sunday of the church year has been known is, of course, ‘stir-up Sunday’, given that title from today’s collect from the Book of Common Prayer - "*Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people, that they plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded, through Jesus Christ our Lord”. Amen. A*ssociated with being the Sunday when the Christmas pudding would be mixed and stirred by each member of the family or passing friend and steamed for hours on end, filling the house with a nice spicy smell as well as lots of steam. Judging from various features I have seen, I may be quite unusual as I still make a pudding each year and, I do ask whoever’s in the house to come and have a stir.

But, back to the subject in hand - The question is what type of kingship is it that we are celebrating today?

In the Anglo-Saxon poem, *The Dream of the Rood,* Jesus embraces the cross as a warrior king engaging in mortal combat. It was considered degrading for an Anglo-Saxon king to display weakness and suffer humiliation in battle. So, while Jesus is ‘strong and unflinching’, the poet makes the cross itself experience the torment of crucifixion. Is this unrealistic? Not for Luke, who leaves us in no doubt, even here at this point of utter human vulnerability, of the kingship of Jesus.

In the verses just before our reading, we have a mirror image of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem arriving, acclaimed as King (arriving on a colt feted by the crowd waving palms and shouting halleluiah) , but leaving, accompanied by tears. Not a mounted king, but a beaten man going to a criminal’s death, too weak to bear the physical weight demanded of him. All aspirations of kingship are surely utterly shattered.

But, before we turn away from this grisly picture of cruelty and humiliation, we see the words written above “this is the King of the Jews” and we hear the voice of the unlikely believer “remember me when you come into your kingdom”. Someone here has caught a glimpse of the glory that is hidden by the awfulness of this torturing death. And we hear another voice – the voice of authority coming from the defeat of the cross: “today you will be with me in paradise”.

Within this are echoes of the Song of Songs, the bride addressing the ‘daughters of Jerusalem’ (Luke 23.28), summoning them to come out and see King Solomon, crowned, passing by. We hear Jesus speak, evoking the prophet Hosea’s words of judgement from God on his idolatrous people. With ‘king’ and ‘messiah’, the leaders think they mock, but there is truth in the plea of the second criminal: the kingdom is near. In the face of cruelty and shattered hopes, we are not to lose sight of the sovereignty of God.

And here is a king prepared to suffer alongside us. This is not a king who holds himself aloof from the ordinary people. This is a king who experiences betrayal, savage injustice, brutal cruelty and utter humiliation and yet maintains his dignity and integrity. This is a king who has lived life as we live it, who has died as we must die but who now lives a new resurrection life. He reassures us and welcomes us into that same resurrection life in his Kingdom where we will know the peace and healing for which we have longed.

The picture of kingship in our gospel story turns traditional kingship on its head. It reaches out to us, calling us to offer ourselves to Christ the King and we can perhaps sense what a difference this would make to our lives if we did.

And it is that undeserved suffering of Jesus that somehow, mysteriously, turns the heart of a wrongdoer and inspires repentance and real contrition.

How, is this message reinforced by our Old Testament reading and from our epistle.

Jeremiah condemns the leaders of Israel and promises a righteous king. The original audience for Jeremiah’s message was a Jerusalem under siege in 6th BC. Jeremiah pictures a people whose leadership has left them fragmented and pulling in different directions; a situation, we can identity with in our troubled times. The people are scattered and have lost any sense of who they are. They no longer remember that they are God’s people and belong together in community. For this, Jeremiah firmly blames the leaders who should have shepherded their people, but instead have allowed them to become scattered and lost. In their place, God will raise up faithful shepherds, who will restore that lost sense of belonging and security. And then, at last, his people will be ready for the coming of the Messiah, because now they will be in a position to recognise his reign of ‘justice and righteousness’ (Jer 23.5) for what it is – an echo of God’s own nature. In their initial state of distress and alienation, they would not have recognised “justice and righteousness” even if handed to them on a plate.

In contrast the Colossians have arrived at that happy state where they can recognise the rule of God. They have indeed taken the next step, the one implied at the end of the reading from Jeremiah, and made the connection between their shepherd and God. They have come to see that Jesus has taken them out of confusion, darkness and submission to false leaders into God’s kingdom of free and forgiven people. They have also come to see that he can do this because he is the full reflection of God’s own loving and reconciling Kingship.

Jeremiah looks to a time when his people will be rescued, and Colossians that they have been already. Luke tells us that that rescuer is the man hanging on the cross. He gives us that paradoxical, the contradictory, picture of Jesus, hanging helplessly in pain and near death, and yet still the King, opening the gates of his kingdom to the bewildered, misled, barely human rabble about him. As he asks for forgiveness for the crowd, and as he leads the thief into the kingdom, he is, in his agony, still the one whom all ‘thrones…..dominions…..rulers…..powers’ (Colossians 1.16) must acknowledge as Lord.

The thief has instinctively what Jeremiah’s people have to relearn – a sense of God’s justice. He recognises his own guilt and Jesus’ innocence and so demonstrates that he can still recognise God. His ability to see the lineaments of God’s face and God’s rule of righteousness and justice fits him for the kingdom.

To learn to do the same, to be able to recognise the character of God’s reign and to long for it, we need to borrow the Colossians’ key, which is Jesus Christ and to look for his likeness day by day until we can recognise and love it.

God’s majesty endures. Christ is King. We live and travel, in hope. As the world descends into darkness, and light fades, this vision keeps us on the road, travelling in the right direction.

The vision of Christ the King speaks to us on the eve of Advent in the same way as the vision of Christ transfigured prepares us, year after year, on the threshold of Lent. Even as the darkness deepens and “change and decay in all around [we] see”, we receive the assurance of that share in the inheritance of the saints which we have been promised.

So great is the faith of the penitent thief that he receives from Jesus that blessed assurance for which we all hope at our dying: “this day you will be with me in paradise”. Here then is the Christian hope in pure form. Amen