

Year C Proper 34 Christ the King

Jeremiah 23: 1-6

Colossians 1: 11-20

Luke 23: 33-43

This last Sunday in our liturgical year is a time to reflect on and celebrate the reign of Christ, as we celebrate as 'Christ the King Sunday'.

Our Gospel reading from Luke's account of the crucifixion may seem a curious extract from the gospels to use on this day, when we could have been reading an inspiring teaching or read of a healing or feeding in excess of 5,000 people with one boy's packed lunch. But there is sense in choosing this reading.

It reminds us that Jesus' mission was radical and yes, political. Jesus' message was one of love for all, without stopping to work out if the other person was 'worth it' or was 'one of us', whatever 'us' may mean at that moment in time. Jesus taught people about the dangers of worshipping power and authority, about worshipping personal wealth and prioritising their own wellbeing over the wellbeing of all the community, strangers and friends, natives and aliens. Jesus taught people that each one of them was a wonderful work of God, worthy of respect and dignity, of love and care, and that systems and power structures that worked against such aims were anathema to God, and did nothing to bring God's kingdom down to earth.

Jesus was brought before Pilate, the Roman Governor, with three main charges against him. All three were what we can only describe as political. The charge sheet the accusers brought to Pilate included:

- ✝ Jesus was subverting the nation with his radical teaching a threat to the established order.

- ✝ Jesus was urging people to not pay their taxes, due to Caesar and the Roman Empire
- ✝ Jesus was saying that he was King, not the Roman proclaimed king, Caesar.

Now, we know that the charge sheet was untruthful and those who arrested Jesus had bent the facts to suit their own vested interests in having this wondering rabbi silenced. But at one level, the charge sheet was correct. Jesus' whole mission was focussed on being an example of how God asked his people to live, and using teaching, acts of healing and other miracles to give people powerful and meaningful insights as to what God's kingdom on earth would be like. Jesus, through his example, was showing the people a new and radical way to live and love, that would usher in the age of God's kingdom on earth. It challenged not just the Roman occupier's ways of living and ruling, but also the ways of living of the Jews and the laws they were following. Jesus' teaching emphasised all aspects of radical love in the Hebrew scriptures and cut out the rest.

Jesus was therefore 'political'. In Greek, the root word '*polites*' means 'a citizen'. So, anything addressing how citizens lived their lives and how they structured their communities and created rules by which to live a well-ordered life, was political.

And, to the end, Jesus continued to live according to kingdom values. He did not change his teachings or moderate them despite the opposition by those with vested interests in the status quo. He, beyond our human comprehension, did not get angry with the mob or with Pilate and Herod. He showed God's love for them, even knowing the inevitable conclusion of this unfair and unjust trial. He remained humble, living and dying a sacrificial life. A very different style of kingship indeed.

Jesus' idea of kingship was not how the world understood kingship. In Paul's letter to the Colossians, Paul does his best to describe the

rule of Jesus. In this wonderful confessional statement, Paul says, *'He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross'*. (v. 18-20).

This is our King... Whose teachings were and remain radical. Let us not water them down to become a cosy anodyne, inoffensive set of stories that fail to challenge us, fail to make each one of us feel some discomfort when we hear them and take a moment to reflect on our own lives. There is a real danger that we treat Jesus as King solely to worship him, which he never asked for, and to conveniently lose focus on his teachings and how they should inform our lives today, in this moment. There is a real danger we read the bits we wish to read and skate over the bits that challenge us. There is also a real danger that we compartmentalise our faith, making it individualistic and so personal that it doesn't appear to make any difference as to how we act and have our being in the world.

I believe to be Christian is to seek to continue the work of Christ the King; to follow his teachings, and despite our human weaknesses, seek to live a life more like Jesus, each and every day.

For many of us, to be Christian is to find ways to alleviate the suffering of others, through work, through volunteering, or by making donations so that others can act 'on the front line'. Today, as we remember Barney Hunter's life, we acknowledge his example of volunteering for Bethany Christian Trust to help the homeless. We also have quite a few members of our church acting as hosts to Ukrainian guests. These are just one example of what members of our congregation do in Christ's name.

For some, to be Christian also means getting actively involved in challenging the systems, processes and structures of our world, to make them more aligned to the kingdom of God – where there are no oppressed, hungry, thirsty, naked, or ill people, uncared for by those who have more than enough.

In recent weeks and even the last few days we have seen the choices being made that will have an impact on so many people. In the UK we have witnessed the choices made about taxes and government spending and the impact on those who are suffering the effects of poor mental and physical health, those needing social and personal care in their old age, those who are unemployed and those who are in poorly paid employment, as a result of the Autumn financial statement. Internationally, we have heard the statements from leaders of the most polluting nations at COP27, and we already see, feel and hear the impact of climate change on the poorest countries and this year, on western Europe. COP27 is battling the future of this planet against those who focus on their own short-term benefits. It amazed me this morning, although perhaps it shouldn't have, to hear a report on the radio stating that there were about 600 fossil-fuel lobbyists at COP27.

As we celebrate Christ the King, and as we will shortly profess our faith with the words of the Nicene Creed, now more than ever before – given the state of the world - our identity as people of God, made in the image of God, should compel us to find ways to live more fully in harmony with the teachings of radical love by Christ the King.

It is for each one of us to reflect in our own time of prayer before God, to sense once more what it means to say that Christ is our King. What does living out that confession mean for each one of us today? Christ is King, and God's kingdom that we live in is an incarnational world. Uncomfortable as it may be, we are called to act in some way.

But, frankly, it is a cop-out to expect God to act when we will not. For after all, Teresa of Avila says we are Christ's hands and feet.

Choosing to have Christ as our king is not an easy choice. But with God's help and the Holy Spirit's guidance, we can each do whatever we can, to respond to Jesus' example of radical love.

When our worship ends today, and you hear the dismissal, take out from this building the commission, 'to love and serve the Lord'.