

**Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> November 2018**  
**Christ the King (B)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Daniel 7.9-10,13-14**

**NT: Revelation 1.4b-8**

**G: John 18.33-37**

Almost ten years ago, I had a significant conversation with two of my oldest and best friends. Now, I often struggle to remember conversations I had ten minutes ago, and I'm sure that many, if not all of you, will sympathise with me in this regard, but this conversation has remained firmly lodged in my memory because it was the first time that I had discussed my burgeoning Christian faith with my close friends. I was very happy – and relieved – to discover that, not only did my friends not think I was mad (or, at least, any madder than they thought I was already), but also that they had been exploring their own relationships to faith, and were keen to discuss this with me. Nevertheless, despite the significance of this conversation, and the unfading memory of it having taken place, I struggle, after the passing of almost a decade, to recall many of the details of our discussion; yet one moment has remained clearly in my mind. We had been talking about Jesus, how Jesus is concerned for the poor, the sick, the homeless, the hungry, the disempowered, the elderly, the young, the stranger: 'Jesus is definitely a socialist' said one of my friends. I simply sat there, saying nothing – part of me wanted to agree, as it seemed that, on the face of it, the kind of progressive, socialist, left-wing ideology that brought us the National Health Service does indeed engage with and reflect the concerns of Jesus; nevertheless, something was giving me pause for thought – and then it came to me: 'But' I said, 'Jesus is a King.' At that point, we all fell silent as, in truth, I don't think any of us knew what else to say; the conversation moved on, but this point remained hanging, unchallenged, but, somehow unresolved.

The reason for this is, I suspect, one that we can probably all relate to as Christians, namely, the tensions that seem to exist between some of our ideas about Jesus Christ, which include the aforementioned concerns for the marginalised, and our ideas about kingship, which include notions of authority, hierarchy, inherited status, class, politics, violence, and the exercising of power through these means. These tensions are perhaps even more apparent in our particular context – that is, the context of Christianity as

understood and practised in a liberal, Western democracy. This might obviously be the case for those Christians who would call themselves republicans, but even if we describe ourselves as monarchists, or royalists, we like nice, safe, constitutional monarchs, as opposed to autocratic despots; in short, we're not entirely sure how we feel about kings, we are not certain that they are necessarily good things – but we are pretty sure that Jesus is a good thing. So how do we, as 21<sup>st</sup>-century, post-Enlightenment, post-industrial, post-modern Christians, fit the square peg that is Christ the King into the round hole that is our enlightened, Western, liberal, democratic, constitutionally-monarchical culture? Well, the short answer is: we don't. And that is, I think, ok – because thinking about Jesus should take us out of our comfort zone, it should make us question our understanding of the world, it should break open the restrictive mould of our cultures and contexts – it should make us think again.

In our gospel reading, it is fairly clear that Jesus' kingship is Pontius Pilate's main concern; after all, Pilate is the representative of another kind of king: the Roman emperor, in whose rule the power of the Rome is embodied, and upon whom it is focused. For Pilate, kingship means power, and, therefore, Jesus' kingship is, potentially, a threat to his, and Rome's, power. In this sense, Pilate stands for us, and for our own instinctive response to Jesus' kingship: we think of a human kingship, and the kind of oppressive power structures that go with this – and we feel uncomfortable. We feel uncomfortable because the book of Daniel's and the book of Revelation's images of Jesus as him 'that all peoples, nations and languages should serve', 'the ruler of the kings of the earth' on whose 'account all the tribes of the earth will wail' is, well, intimidating, frightening, and, perhaps, a bit too close to our negative ideas about human authority, with the potential for the kind of unjust abuses of power that human authority usually, in some way, entails. We feel more comfortable with Jesus the shepherd, Jesus the servant, the Jesus who heals the divided nations of the world, rather than making them wail – after all, Jesus is he through whom all nations are blessed, the fulfilment of God's covenant with Abraham. But is he a king? How does Jesus answer Pilate's question? 'My kingdom is not from this world.'

So, yes, Jesus does identify himself as a king – but not a king as Pilate knows it, or as we know it; Jesus is the king of truth: a real king, the only true king. But why is he a king? Where does his kingly authority come from? He is a king, because he is the Son, whose authority, and kingship, comes from the Father and who, through the power of the Holy Spirit, rules over us now, the one ‘who is, who was and who is to come, the Almighty.’ But Jesus’ rule is not one of force or coercion – paradoxically, it is power exercised through weakness; Jesus is a king because he ‘freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom’; Jesus is both he who leads us out of slavery to sin, into the promised land of God’s Kingdom, and the Passover lamb of this new exodus, the very sacrifice which makes this freedom possible: the power of Jesus’ kingship is realised in this ultimate moment of powerlessness. And this turns upside down our human conception of what a king is: it means that a true king is not someone who gathers power to themselves, but someone who gives power away, who gives themselves away. And if this, if this Jesus, is the true definition of a king, then instead of simply feeling uncomfortable about Jesus’ kingship, perhaps we have to actually change our ideas about what a king is. Indeed, if Jesus is the true definition of a king, then we must admit that we don’t fully understand what a king is, because we do not yet understand the fullness of Christ ‘who is to come’. Christ the King is a double-edged sword, Christ the King cuts both ways, making us re-think what we understand kingship to be, but perhaps also making us aware that Jesus is more than we sometimes think we know.

So, what does it mean to be a subject of Christ the King? Because that is what we are called to be, and that is what we are – we are part of the kingdom made through Christ’s ultimate act of self-giving. But, again, this is not subjection by force, or by coercion: we are invited to share in this kingdom, to share in Jesus’ rule, to become one with the ruler as part of the body of Christ the King; but in this sharing, in this Holy Communion, we are called to share in powerlessness, to assume power by giving it away, to acknowledge our own weakness, to accept that we have no power apart from Jesus. We come not because we are strong, but because we are weak; we come not because we have any claim on heaven’s rewards, but because in our frailty and sin we stand in constant need of heaven’s grace, of God’s mercy. And in so doing, we submit our sinful selves to the judgement of Christ the King, knowing that Jesus only exercises true

justice, that he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and that his kingdom will have no end.

Louis Johnson