

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

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Daniel 5**  
**NT: John 6.1-15**

The Feast of Christ the King, which we celebrate to-day on the last Sunday of the Christian Year, is a relatively modern invention. Proclaimed by Pope Pius XI in 1925, it found its way into the Anglican calendar more recently as the culmination of the kingdom season, that month between All Saints and Advent when the solemn remembrance of our dead in a sad season of falling leaves and darkening days is set in the shimmering context of our faith in their resurrection, and in the ultimate triumph of Christ. We look forward in faith to that great day beyond all time and space when Christ will be seen to reign over all things at the right hand of his Father in Heaven.

Our readings invite us to reflect on what kingship is all about. The Psalm presents an idealised vision of earthly kingship, an expression of the hopes which centred around the young King Solomon - wise and just, respected and powerful. The tale of Belshazzar offers the contrast of a spectacularly bad young king, arrogant, crassly insensitive, and swiftly doomed. Finally our reading from John's gospel depicts Jesus slipping away from a crowd who want to make of him the wrong sort of king.

In all this we are offered two models of kingly rule, one which all too often ends in nemesis - that very night was Belshazzar the king slain and his kingdom divided - and another which appears to fail, but actually ends in triumph. The Bible is full of kings who fail either morally or politically or on both counts. It was with great reluctance that God was persuaded to give the Israelites a king like other nations, and although there were some partial exceptions, most

of them are recorded as doing evil in the sight of the Lord. Even with prophets of the stature of Elijah and Elisha to rein them in, they continually went off the rails.

The book of Daniel was never intended to be read as history. It was probably written more than 300 years after the events it purports to relate and Daniel himself is quite possibly fictional, though there could have been a folk memory of exiles finding employment in the Babylonian administration. In Daniel 5 we have the tale of the riotous banquet reduced to silence by the appearance of a hand writing on the wall. His ability to interpret dreams not only wins the trust and respect of the immensely powerful but foolish kings in these stories; it also establishes his credentials as the visionary prophet of the apocalyptic visions that fill the rest of the book. A strange mix it may be of fiction and vision, but the book of Daniel speaks with the authentic voice of true prophecy, not least about kingship and power. Belshazzar is not the only one to over reach himself. In earlier chapters Nebuchadnezzar is equally guilty of the pride and arrogance,

Belshazzar's sin is the belief that he owes his power and authority to nobody but himself. Flaunting his pride, he calls for the ritual vessels from the temple at Jerusalem to be brought out of store, so that he and his friends can drink from them at their wild party. This is an act of deliberate sacrilegious debauchery. He is stopped in his tracks by the writing on the wall, which he cannot read, much less interpret. The words which Daniel reads out for him are actually rather prosaic - weights used in coinage - MENE a very large sum, TEKEL a much smaller one, PARSIN equivalent to half a tekem - a sharply diminishing series symbolising the rapid crumbling of his great empire. But Daniel makes it personal- you are weighed in the balance and found wanting. In the book there is time for the prophet and soothsayer to be rewarded with promotion to third in the kingdom before the king is struck down. Not so in

Walton's condensed operatic version, where in a few bars of music Belshazzar is slain, and we are transported to a joyously jazzy celebration of deliverance and triumph

Then sing, sing aloud to God our strength

Make a joyful noise to the god of Jacob

For Babylon the Great is fallen. Alleluia!

These words were selected by Walton's librettist, Osbert Sitwell, not from the book of Daniel but from the book of Revelation, where the Babylon of Belshazzar and Nebuchadnezzar has become symbolic of all God-denying secular power. This is the heavenly banquet of Christ the King, where we shall all join to celebrate his triumph.

'So you are a king then.' Jesus stands before Pilate who is almost as troubled by the calm presence of the prisoner before him as Belshazzar was by the movements of that mysterious hand. Earlier in his ministry, as we heard in our second reading, Jesus had refused to be taken by the crowd and made king. They would have wanted him to be their king, a king on their terms, a king who would drive out the Romans and establish a dominant Jewish state. That was not his destiny. He had to slip away. But now, when Pilate challenges him, he does not deny his kingship. 'You say that I am a king.' And indeed he has implicitly encouraged the making of such a claim by entering Jerusalem on a donkey, in the manner prophesied for a king by the prophet Zechariah. He has been cheered to the echo by a crowd shouting Hosanna to the son of David. The donkey is a symbol of his humility, and the king who comes on such a beast is to command peace, but the crowd was not interested in that bit, and Pilate certainly doesn't know it. This time Jesus had come as king on his own terms. He had come to bring peace and reconciliation to men and women, and to the nations, by allowing himself to become the focus for all the anger and viciousness of jealous and frightened leaders in church and state as well as the cruelty of the mob. The true crown would be the one pressed

to his head in mockery as the Roman soldiers prepared to crucify him under a rough sign that said: This is Jesus, the King of the Jews. He had come to bear in himself the worst that we can do to one another, dying for us, to break definitively the cycle of evil, revenge and more evil by responding with loving forgiveness and reconciliation.

'So you are a king then.' The uncomfortable truth is that most of us here tonight are in some measure kings and queens, in the sense that we exercise power over others, as Belshazzar did. It may be at work or at home or in the context of some other group to which we belong. Our decisions may affect just one or two others, a small group of family or staff, or perhaps a much larger number. We may not be tempted to abuse our power as grossly as Belshazzar, but we may feel we have worked hard to get it, and that gives us the right to use it and enjoy it. Perhaps we should use the feast of Christ the King to remind ourselves that all power is held in trust. We need to be just as ready to let it go as to accumulate more, when that is what our love for others requires of us. For we have enlisted in the service of Christ the King, whose Spirit has the power to inspire and enable us, by His grace, to follow his royal example.

Fr Bill Addy