

Sunday 24 November 2024
Christ the King

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Daniel 7.9-10, 13-14

NT: Revelation 1.4b-8

Gp: John 18.33-37

The feast of Christ the King follows a tradition solemnised first by Pope Pius XI in 1925, at a time of various revolutions across Europe that toppled a few monarchies and saw increasing secularism and subsequently the rise of fascism in Europe. The original date set for this feast was the Sunday before the feast of All Saints. Pope Paul VI revised the calendar during the Second Vatican Council and moved it to the last Sunday before the start of Advent, as a fitting end to the liturgical year: Christ being confessed as the Lord of the Year, 'the one to whom was given dominion and glory and kingship that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him', as our Old Testament reading from the book of Daniel put it. Anglicans followed suit and have kept the feast too.

But if people at the beginning of the twentieth century found it difficult to obey human kings and emperors, why do they need to be obedient to the rule of Christ? To be told that your will should be educated by submitting to someone else, let alone one 'who you should serve' is hardly a welcome call. Nonetheless, the Christian will find it hard to ignore this call. Before we allow our feelings to be revolted by what so readily seems an assault on our autonomy, we should check what all of this is about. In the Book of Revelation, we are reminded that Jesus is the 'the first born of the dead, the ruler of the kings of the earth who loves us and freed us and made us a kingdom, serving his God and Father'. Jesus is King because he is obedient, and his obedience costs him. His conformity is not to an alien authority, or a hostile tyrant in the heavens, but to the reality and root of his life. He acts from 'the Father's own heart' (John 1: 14) – whose will is for the healing of creation, for our freedom and peace.

Therefore, to obey Christ is not to do violence to your own proper reality. To obey Christ is to discover yourself as a created being, who is grounded in the loving life of God and nothing else. God's will is that you live; to obey him is to seek life. This is what the apostles, just as Pope Pius XI, wanted to point out, insisting that kingship belongs to Christ rather than to human authority, especially when they/we are ordered to give up what flows from their life in Christ. To serve God in Christ is to be in touch with the most real. TO refuse this is to become an alien yourself.

All of this suggests that we do have a fresh radical call here. To obey Christ is not a passive conformity to an alien power, or in the hope that this will somehow give us rewards here or in the hereafter. So, we come to the heart of our Gospel reading today. Pilate asks Jesus if he is a king, and Jesus eventually answers that his royal authority is not the world's kind, 'not

from hence', in the old translations – 'not of this world, or 'not of this sort', the sort where people fight to defend a territory. Jesus' kingship is independent of questions of legitimacy or succession, or any external assurance that he is the rightful heir. The kingship he exercises is the kind of power that cannot be defended by violence. Pilate is puzzled: 'So are you a king then?', 'You say that I am a king', responded Jesus. For Pilate, kingship refers to imperial administration. Use the word if you want but remember that its content is utterly changed. This kind of royal authority is inseparable from the task, the calling of embodying truth. This truth compels our attention, our listening. Pilate will eventually ask the most celebrated question of the New Testament, not included in today's gospel reading: 'What is Truth?'. If our obedience is a form of attention to the truth of Christ, that means that the attentive person is the one who will command obedience from us too.

So, our obedience to Christ is the kind where we see authority engaged with truth beyond its own interest and horizon, with the truth of Christ himself. You might say that is why political obedience in our age has become so problematic. The fourth century Church historian Eusebius of Caesarea was able to commend the authority of the emperor Constantine on the grounds that he was constantly engaged in contemplating the heavenly Logos. It was not even then a very plausible case; but he had at least noticed that any Christian justification for obedience to rulers must build in some reference to their capacity to absorb truth that is not determined by their interests. We obey those who obey Christ.

Now, we do not usually look in our various governments for signs of advanced contemplative practice; nor do we say, as Christians, that no obedience is due to unbelieving government. But we do say that credible claims on our political loyalty have something to do with a clear attention to truth, even unwelcome truth. That's why when parliament debates questions of euthanasia, we feel obliged to ask questions about truth. Life and death are huge matters. The fact that we can reflect on their meaning and their purpose is itself a gift. And we do no favour if we reduce debates about the beginning or end of life emotive language about murder and killing. Instead, we attempt to show those who govern how to watch us struggling to watch Christ, to ask what we want life to mean, what we hope it can mean and to face the fact that quality of life is as important as existence itself. It means to try and allow the ground of our very existence to come to the surface and find expression in the way we act, making every thought obedient to the incarnate mind of God. This is a struggle for many people to understand today because we have become such strangers to our own nature as God's beloved creation. But in Christ we see how a human self like us can become transparent to God's gift, to be indistinguishable from the mind of God the Father. We learn by watching those who have got used to the work.

There is no doubt that with the recent few weeks' headlines from Lambeth Palace, we will be reminded of the government's impatience with ecclesiastical generalisations, telling us to put our house in order before we start preaching to others; but this is not an argument for civic quiescence. A government that ignores the concerns of people in matters of life and

death would be failing in attention. Christian obedience, therefore, is intelligent obedience, and a careful, reflective and challenging loyalty. We put the fruits of our attention at the service of government to stir their attention.

Why? Because our King is ultimately met in the manger and on the cross. In a month's time, we will be celebrating Jesus in the arms of Mary, a baby born. This Jesus in the womb of Mary, and this Jesus dying on the Cross is the same Jesus 'in whom all the fullness of Godhead dwells bodily' (Colossians 2: 9-10). Divine fullness is alive in a naked man, in a baby wrapped in cloth. God's kingship over us is not to overwhelm us with majesty, not to conquer our space, but to live his life 'in little spaces' and in 'shameful spaces' and to speak there the quiet words that summon us to faith. Only when we are very quiet can we hear. Only when we stand still can we give him room. Faced with the fullness of God in the baby of Bethlehem, the tired wanderer in Galilee, the body on the cross, we have to look at ourselves hard and ask what it is that makes us too massive and clumsy to go into the little space' where we meet God in Jesus Christ. As we celebrate this feast and prepare for Advent and the Christmas season, we need above all to remember what Christ says again and again – that there is no way in his little space without shedding our great load of arrogant self-reliance, bluster, noisy fear and fantasy.

But when we have set this aside, we find that it is only in that same little space that there is room for all of us – forgiven, welcomed, made inheritors of the divine fullness of life and joy that God longs to share with us. Behind the low door of the stable, behind the tomb of Christ, is infinity of mercy and love; that is why he is King, not straining our eyes to see a distant God, but a God whose fullness dwells in that space we are not small and simple enough to enter.

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