

John 18.33-37
24th November 2024
Christ the King

King of the Jews?

Lord God our prayer is that you might touch my lips, open our hearts & transform our lives in the power of the Spirit and for the honour of Christ. Amen.

Ask most people to describe a character from history, like Churchill, and we often come up with just one idea. He was an inspiring war leader. Yet, of course, he was more than that because, amongst other things, he was also an accomplished artist and even taught himself brick laying.

Closer to our time, over recent years we've learnt that Tom Dailey isn't just a diver, he's also a passionate knitter!

Growing up I remember staying with my grandparents at Northwood Hills and realising, for the first time, that my grandfather was more than just a wonderful gardener, because, during that stay, I saw him in his railway uniform going off to work as Station Master at Pinner.

We are all gloriously multi-faceted. And if human beings are many things all at once, what do we make of God, whose character has been a constant source of delight and confusion to us since time began?

Of course, when it comes to God, we cannot know the whole picture and no wonder the Jewish Scriptures give us a description that sounds both comprehensive and enigmatic in that phrase of self-disclosure: *I am who I am*.

Well, today we are thinking of the description of God as King, always remembering that's just one facet of God's character, never the whole picture.

Pope Pius XI instituted the idea of Christ the King Sunday back in 1925. It was a worrying moment in time with fascist regimes on the rise. In those troubling days as the Pontiff saw whole swathes of society putting their trust in totalitarian leaders, he used an encyclical calling his flock to think of Christ as their King, and put their renewed trust in him.

Since then, I suspect, there's been 99 years and thousands of sermons seeking to explore what that title means and, in fact, whether or not it's even appropriate.

Our closing hymn today, like many of the Psalms, thinks of God as a King, and perhaps the most obvious interpretation of that is to celebrate God's strength and dependability.

The psalmists proclaimed a mighty God, a great Creator and a King worthy of our trust, loyalty and worship, and I suspect there are times in our journey of faith when such a Kingly picture of God has been a source of comfort and inspiration for us, and so we sing: *Rejoice the Lord is King.*

Yet, we Christians also believe that in a very wonderful way our clearest picture of God is to be found in the life and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ, and it's Jesus who radically, and we might even say subversively, turns our understanding of Kingship on its head. Jesus is the Servant King, and for him God's Kingdom and reign is always, always primarily about service rather than power.

Of course, it's true that it didn't take us Christians long to redefine our understanding of Jesus by over-emphasising the resurrection whilst under-playing the crucifixion. Perhaps we've all been there, so that at Easter we might view Friday as an inconvenient segway, purely there, to take us to what's really important, the Sunday.

Now, Easter Sunday is full of hope and where would our faith be without it? Yet Good Friday is vital and pivotal because it helps us grapple with a question Pilate not only asked of Jesus, but also the plaque he put on his cross: *Jesus, what sort of King are you? Indeed, are you really the King of the Jews?*

Today is technically the last Sunday of the Church Year. Advent Sunday, next week, marks the beginning of a new liturgical year when most of our sermons will come from the gospel of Luke. This year we've been in Mark yet today, on the final Sunday, we find ourselves in John. And he's doing what he often does, he's expanding those short passages from Mark, the earliest gospel, and he's filling them in and deepening them.

So, in John's gospel, in today's reading we meet with Jesus who is on trial in the Praetorium, the official residence of Pontius Pilate, Jerusalem's Roman Governor. It's said that today's passage is scene two of the seven scene trial of Jesus and that the drama is unfolding, at least from Pilate's point of view, in a somewhat absurd fashion.

That's because Jesus is in the Praetorium, but the Jewish authorities, who have brought him to trial, are all outside, keeping themselves ritually clean. This means the accused and the accusers are not in the same room. So, it's Pilate, rather unceremoniously, who has to flit between the two. It's almost pantomime-esque!

Initially we get the impression that Pilate rather mocked these Jewish leaders who were incapable of keeping their own people in order. But, once they go as far as citing the idea that Jesus is accepting the title King of the Jews, which was seen as a direct threat to the Emperor, Pilate starts taking them seriously.

In its pursuit of the *Pax Romana*, the peace of the empire was strictly managed. Caesar was top dog, and if conquered nations did hang on to their monarch, like King Herod, it was only as a puppet sovereign with all the strings being pulled from

Rome.

So, if anyone called themselves King of the Jews it would initially have to be taken seriously as a probably threat to the status quo.

But isn't something wrong with this trial at the Praetorium? For there must have been many held here like it in the past. False messiahs, political insurrectionists and, no doubt, many who had claimed that they were a King of the Jews. And on those occasions its probable that the accused followers would have been rounded up too, so that a new movement would be stopped in its tracks. Yet, Jesus' followers, on this night, were never arrested but let free to roam.

So, maybe, despite asking the question, Pilate already knew the answer – that in the classic way the title King of the Jews was understood, as a political, military leader come to set a captive people free – well, Jesus just didn't fit the bill.

Sure, Jesus was then, and probably is now, a confusing figure. On the one hand he seems to shun politics and says *my kingdom is not of this world*, yet after every sermon, in every village, he breaks the status quo giving honour to the weakest, those who lived in oppression.

Maybe, all along, Pilate knew the Jewish authorities were simply pinning a convenient, but inauthentic label on Jesus, one that would blackmail Pilate into bringing him to trial, one that would force the sentence of execution. Yet Pilate seems more aware than they, that Jesus has been mis-accused and wrongly sentenced, so he literally washes his hands of it all.

Jesus accepts the title King only to subvert it. This King comes as a servant and this Kingdom is defined by service. It in no way fitted the political, insurrectionist intentions which had traditionally been associated with the title *King of the Jews*.

It confused his first century listeners, even as it does us in the twenty first – and after two thousand years the question remains: *what sort of king is Jesus?*

If that's the question, it's the cross that goes some way in giving us the answer.

We could view Jesus' death at Calvary as the result of accusations railed at him by the religious authorities and that he died through Roman execution. Even in historical theological terms Good Friday has for centuries been seen as a wrathful God punishing a loving son.

I think these offer an unhelpful, even harmful prism of understanding.

Jesus is surely not acting passively in going to the cross, he is no doormat being walked over. Regularly in the gospels we hear the phrase he *set his face resolutely towards Jerusalem*. Jesus willingly gives up his life in loving service. And love has a strange way of threatening power. Rather than deny all he has preached and walk away from the life transforming compassion he had advocated and lived,

Jesus walks resolutely to the cross.

Pilate had asked him *What is truth?* We are perhaps a bit perplexed at Jesus' lack of response, and maybe it's because it was this combination of his life and death that revealed God's truth that the only path worth taking is one of loving and compassionate service.

One bible commentator I read this week puts it like this: *Jesus is the mad king: weak, crucified, crowned with thorns, his death depicted in deeds what Jesus taught in words: greatness is lowliness and compassion, the last is first and loving matters most.*

In other words, it's Jesus' death that interprets his ministry.

Today we've been contemplating a title, a description of God. Poets and hymn writers have been doing that for centuries and, in truth, all our words about God inevitably fall short. But should we give us such a noble quest?

I love a line from John Mason's hymn, written in the 1600's, How shall I sing that Majesty? it goes: *Thou art a sea without a shore, a sun without a sphere.*

But I think Jesus, at least, gave us permission to have a go and not give up on words. For that must be the reason behind the seven wonderful *I AM* sayings found in John's gospel. At least four of them describe the Godly ministry of Jesus in the everyday images of agricultural, country living. *I am...the bread of life, the good shepherd, the true vine or the door to the sheep pen.* Our Lord knew how helpful it can be to imagine God using pictures.

So, what pictures of God sustain your faith? A Good Shepherd? The Light of the World? A hen gathering her chicks under her wings. The water of life?

Well, here at AFC, on this Christ the King Sunday we are so fortunate in having another picture before us in the Blessing Service we held earlier for Mathilda. Here in church, we have celebrated the love that is shared in a family, love that brings to birth and then nurtures life.

God who is love. God who is our mother. God who is our father. God, who gives and nurtures life in us all.

God - a sea without a shore – beyond description yet felt in every act of love we have ever experienced.

God, the great I AM – who we gladly spend our days naming, exploring and worshipping. Amen.

Ian Green, Amersham, 20th November 2024