

## Christ the King Sunday – 26<sup>th</sup> November

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Ephesians 1:15-end

Matthew 25:31-end

Cast your mind back to September 2022 when the Queen died. It was certainly the end of an era. As it was for many people she was the only sovereign I had lived under. Surely life would change forever when Charles became King. But actually in my day to day routine life its not really any different. King Charles' role is largely ceremonial; he has no decision making power over Government or National policy. We see him on "occasions" such as the state opening of Parliament, the Trooping of the Colour and Remembrance but not much else. He is effectively Head of State in name only.

Of course that has not always been the case in this country.

I am currently reading an historical novel set in the times of the Wars of the Roses - the battle between the houses of Lancaster and York for the throne of England. The heroine is from the house of Lancaster, and who is king is, for her, not even a matter of a choice between good and bad rulers. It's a matter of kings being chosen and appointed by God. In her eyes Henry VI was God's chosen King – Edward IV, even after he had defeated Henry in battle, was nothing but a usurper. Who was king was everything to her. It affected every area of her life – it even determined the relationship between her and her husband who supported Edward.

I don't think that's quite how we view kingship today. Even though King Charles was anointed king in the Coronation ceremony earlier this year we probably wouldn't use the same kind of "chosen and appointed by God" terminology. Somehow it doesn't quite fit with where we are today. Nor is it that we have to choose which of two rival kings deserves our allegiance. Or do we? Lets leave that question hanging for a moment.

Today – the last Sunday before Advent – is in the church's year the festival of Christ the King. Where we think about what it means for Christ to be king; what are its implications for who we are and how we live.

Following the theme of kingship through the Old Testament we see that when the nation of Israel was settled in the promised land – where Israel is first seen as a

nation – it has no king. No earthly king that is – their king is God himself. And God rules through appointed and inspired judges.

The people, though, clamoured for a king so that they can be like other nations. The prophet Samuel warned them that it would all end in tears; the king would soon exploit the people; no good would come from this. Their only king was God. But the people insisted, and eventually God let them have their way. Saul was appointed and anointed. But it didn't take long for Saul to go astray; and then God chose David to be the new King and he was anointed as king. There was a long and protracted conflict between Saul and David, but eventually David became the undisputed king.

David was as it says in the Bible was “a man after God's own heart”. He loved God and sought to follow him in every way. And even though he was not perfect – he was as much a flawed individual as we all are – he was held up as the ideal king. Indeed following David and his son Solomon things went downhill rapidly. Future kings were judged as to whether they did evil in the sight of the Lord or lived according to his laws. Most were found wanting.

God had promised David that a member of his household would rule Israel forever, and that promise soon came to be a prophecy of the coming Messiah, which means the anointed one, God's anointed king. A prophecy that reached its fulfilment in Jesus the Christ – Christ is the Greek for anointed one. Hence Christ the King.

Jesus didn't speak very much about him being King – today's gospel reading is one of few examples of him referring to himself in that way - but he does talk at length about a kingdom – the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven.

In the Old Testament David's kingdom was the nation of Israel. A physical space inhabited by a particular people. As years went on and the various kings turned further away from God the nation fragmented, and eventually the people went into exile, having been conquered by the Babylonians. There was a partial return to the land of Israel, but the expectation was that the long promised messiah figure would properly restore the nation – in terms of its land and its people – and take over where David had left off. In Jesus' time this had evolved into a vision of overthrowing the occupying Romans and recreating an independent Israel under the Messiah king.

But Christ the King had a different vision, a different agenda. He understood kingdom not as a physical place, not as a people made separate by nature of accident of birth but much more a state of mind, a state of being. Anyone who acknowledged God as King – or Jesus as God in human form as King – and accepted his authority was part of the kingdom.

His teaching was that the kingdom of God was already among us – in those who trusted in him and recognised his authority. The kingdom of God was growing – it started small but by lives and witness it would grow and grow. The kingdom of God was both here now and still to come. Here in those who believed and trusted, still to come when the whole world would be brought under God's rule.

His stories, the parables, and his teaching gave an insight into what life in the kingdom would be like. Forgiveness, acceptance, kindness, generosity, welcome, compassion. Today's gospel reading gives an example and a lesson. It is in living out those aspects of kingdom life that we actually encounter the King. When we feed the hungry, when we welcome the stranger etc. we meet the king himself in the person of the hungry and the stranger. This kingdom does not have a king remote in a palace, but a king who lives as we do – who can be seen in the poor and outcast. A topsy turvy kingdom that turns all the world's values on their head.

At the start of this sermon I mentioned that the heroine in the historical novel had to choose which of two kings deserved her allegiance. Perhaps the same choice does after all sit before each of us today.

Will our allegiance be on the basis of what seems good for us, or on the basis of which King is truly God's anointed?

Will we swear allegiance to the princes of this world – money, self-justification and self interest, comfort, how things used to be and so on, - or will we bow down to the king of kings, Christ the King himself.

Will we live our lives in accordance to the ways of the world, or will we become part of the kingdom of God, living out lives that put others first rather than our own needs and desires – in other words lives that put Christ as our centre and our King?