

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

In 1925 in the encyclical entitled *Quas Primas*, Pope Pius XI instituted a new liturgical observance, the Feast of Christ the King. As the Latin suggests the focus is on what ought to come first in this world, hence its attempt to summarise biblical teaching on the kingship of Christ. Behind this lies the rise of fascism and communism in Europe and a context where emerging secularism is eroding Christian belief. With the benefit of hindsight, a new church feast to stem the tide of rampant secularism seems, if you will excuse the pun, somewhat of a 'pius' hope.

Back then, the Pope felt that the followers of Christ were being lured away by the increasing secularism of the world. They were choosing to live in the "kingdom" of the world rather than in the reign of God. Therefore, as we prepare to begin a new church year with the First Sunday of Advent, the coming of Jesus, not only in Bethlehem, but the second coming as well, we pause and reflect upon who Jesus the Christ is in our lives. To challenge our thinking we turn, not to stables and shepherds, but to the final trial of Jesus. If we are to live in God's reign we, like Pilate, need to know who this man Jesus is, "are you Christ the King?"

As the Liturgical Year comes to an end, we are reminded, one last time, of the focus of Christ's life, which is also our calling – the Reign of God. It is tempting to view Christ's Reign as a conquering, all-powerful, phenomenon that will violently destroy human power systems, but that would be to misunderstand it. Rather, what the Lectionary reveals is a Reign that is not of this world, that is a completely different reality, and that works within human systems, even as it subverts them toward justice, peace and love.

Through the Scriptures we see a growing awareness of what it means to call Christ "King". In the Old Testament reading Daniel shares his vision of God's throne, and the One – "like a human being" – who comes in glory on the clouds and who is given all authority and whose kingdom never ends.

Then in our Gospel passage, Pilate asks Jesus if he is the king of the Jews. Jesus replies that his kingdom is not of this world. When Pilate seeks to confirm that he is a king, Jesus cryptically replies that it is Pilate who says so, but that he came into the world to testify to the truth.

The Reign of God has always been a central focus of the worship of God's people. From the time of the promise to David of an eternal dynasty, the vision of the Reign of God's Monarch has been the hope of God's people. Yet, the challenge has always been to understand God's Reign as a completely different order from human power systems. In Samuel and in Psalm 132, the "descendant of David" is contrasted with godless people whose lives are wasted, and is associated with worship and God's presence. In Daniel and in Psalm 93, the Reign of God is depicted as glorious and authoritative, but also as being manifest through one who is "like a human being". In Revelation this one is seen as Jesus, who is revealed in glory, and whose sacrifice is seen as the primary act in bringing God's Reign into the world. Finally, in the encounter between Jesus and Pilate, the difference between human ruler ship and God's Reign is starkly shown, as Jesus explains that he claims no human kingship, but is the king of a realm that is not of this world. It is a kingdom of truth and justice. The challenge of this week's celebration is to avoid triumphalism. We are not to make God's Reign out to be the same as human power systems, only stronger, more dominant, and longer lasting. Rather, we are to recognise God's Reign in acts of compassion and justice, in service and sacrifice, and in the challenge to human systems to give up their obsession with war and conquest in order to build a world of peace and love for all.

The celebration of Christ the King raises two pressing issues for us as followers of Christ:

1. The issue of authority: Jesus cannot be followed while retaining our own agendas. As we follow Christ, we are called to embrace His agenda. In our striving for justice, equity and a better world, there remains the need to proclaim the eternal kingdom of God, and to call people, leaders and communities to faith and to submission to the authority and priorities of Christ.
2. The issue of the nature of God's Reign: The glory of God is revealed not in conquest or power, but in sacrifice and service. God's Reign is not "of this world" – it is a completely different reality that exists within, and subverts, the power systems of the world. Therefore, in our quest for justice, we must be careful not to get drawn into competitive power games in which only some can win, while others lose. Rather, we need to constantly hold ourselves faithful to the service and sacrifice of Christ, to the welcome and inclusivity of Christ, and to the love of Christ for all – even our enemies.

In our own communities and lives, it is easy to set up our own little kingdoms – even when we’re doing good, or working for justice. It is easy to get caught up in purely human agendas and priorities, but ultimately these will all fail us. So, as we seek to live out our faith in compassion and justice, we need also to embody the priorities of Jesus, and call people to higher, eternal values. This means that we relinquish the need to get our own way all the time. It means refusing to co-operate with any systems or courses of action that oppress or reject some people. It means committing to the serving and sacrificial nature of God’s Reign within our families, churches and neighbourhoods. And it means keeping Christ as both the object of our worship (as opposed to our own desires, agendas or needs) and the model on which we base our lives. It is only when we are willing to commit daily to these values that we can truly claim to be worshipping Christ as King.

Finally a few questions to honestly ask ourselves as we go about our daily lives in the week ahead. Do we live in the reign of God following the servant king? Do we live lives that reflect that service? Do we reach out to the least and the lost? Do we seek to serve rather than be served? Do we testify to the truth of God? It is the truth that Jesus came into the world to bring love and forgiveness. Are we citizens of that kingdom? In Jesus’ name, Amen.