

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, o lord; my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

So today we meet together, virtually, on the feast of Christ the King, the last Sunday of the church's year; the last Sunday before we begin a new church year, with the start of Advent and the time of preparation for celebrating Christ's incarnation.

But there's something about the idea of Christ, as king, that grates with many people, creating almost a sense of embarrassment and awkwardness, and this seems to have two sources. One of them is political - many democratically minded Christians feel more comfortable with the image of a pastoral Christ, as suffering servant or good shepherd, than of Christ on a throne. And the other is theological. Although the gospels emphatically hail Christ as king - heir to the throne of David, as well as king of heaven ("the lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David") says the angel Gabriel, "and he shall reign over the house of the Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there shall be no end.")

Jesus in every possible way declined to accept worldly sovereignty.

In the gospels, the life of Jesus is framed by the notion of kingship, from these words of the angel Gabriel at his beginning, to the crucifixion at his end, where the notice, hammered onto the top of the cross, ironically echoes the same unfulfilled promise: 'this is Jesus king of the Jews'. What kind of king begins his earthly life in a stable, and ends it as the victim of a cruel public execution?

And his own reaction, to the question of whether he was a king, is, at least to Pilate, enigmatic. "Are you the king of the Jews?" demands Pilate in John's gospel; and Jesus says "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were my servants would fight to prevent arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place."

Each of us have, in our own minds eye, an image, a picture, a model, of Jesus the Christ, which helps us to follow him, which concentrates our minds, which helps our prayers. But I have a feeling, that for very few of us, does this feature the image of Christ on a throne, exerting the kind of leadership that we associate with the secular, rather than the sacred.

But precisely because this phrase 'the kingship of Christ' and the image of Christ as king mean different things to different people, we need to establish exactly what each one of us expects from Christ's kingship.

And indeed, from leadership in general. And seldom has the issue of leadership been more to the fore than during these traumatic months of 2020.

Debates about leadership styles, leadership validity, trustworthiness, the ability to inspire others, the capacity to deal with crises, and the vision to plan for bad times. A good leader should show sympathy for the poor and disadvantaged, and we have a clear set of pastoral instructions from Jesus in today's gospel, as well as the desire, and the ability, to make a better world.

Leadership is about helping people to reach their full potential. But what of this specific form of leadership which we call earthly kingship?

Few today would support the theory of the divine right of kingship, which asserts that a monarch is subject to no earthly authority, deriving his or her right to rule directly from the will of God. Charles the first was beheaded for this belief nearly 400 years ago, as well as for a few other things, but nowadays kingship seldom involves a direct exercise of political power on the part of the person who's discharging it. A king or a queen reigns but does not govern. But this is not so of Christ.

We've seen, I think we can all agree, many failures of political and secular leadership during this year, and religious leaders have been challenged in previously unimaginable ways, not only to answer the unanswerable question 'why is this happening to us?' but to virtually lead their flocks, their congregations who they may never physically see, in a way undreamed of by our ancestors.

Pastorally taxing times indeed, crying out for definitive guidance. It's therefore, especially appropriate, that the gospel reading for today contains Jesus' last public statement: clear and emphatic instructions about what we should be doing. And we now have a week to contemplate this, and to put our house in order, before Advent Sunday.

The unambiguous message of today's gospel spells out both our responsibilities, and those of our leaders: to feed the hungry; to care for the disadvantaged, and the unwell. And the objective is not merely to frighten us with the fear of condemnation at the end, but to make it unmistakably clear what is expected of us now.

Jesus is stating clearly that judgment will be handed out on the basis of how we treat other people, on whether or not we were compassionate. We are saved and I believe that this means brought into the kingdom of God and given forgiveness and eternal life. We are saved on the basis of what we do, combined with that grace, which is a free gift from God.

The kingship of Christ is not that of a dictator, or of an elected leader, but one of a good shepherd, leading and caring for his flock. This is kingship with responsibility, but also with humility. His kingship, and his leadership, are not of the earthly kind, but includes searching for the lost, bringing back the strays, binding up the injured, and strengthening the weak.

Paul sums up the meaning of the kingship of Christ: God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rules and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named.

These last hard months have brought out many things in society, not all of them good, but one has been an outpouring of community spirit and a redefinition of our responsibilities, a banding together in times of crisis motivated by the grace of God, empowering us to care for our neighbours.

And each of us has to decide for ourselves how we define our neighbour: next door? Family? Parish? Local community? County? Country? Migrant? Refugee? Fellow citizen of this world? Because Jesus is very clear here that salvation requires good works.

If you wish to enter the kingdom of God; to acknowledge the kingship of Christ; to follow the good shepherd; effort is required - decisions must be made, and today is the day when we are supposed to be reminded of our obligations to our fellow world citizens: literally stirred up with good works, for it is indeed Stir Up Sunday, so called for two reasons: the first from the wording of the traditional prayer book collect for the day which begins 'stir up we beseech thee o lord', and the second from the tradition that this was the day when the Christmas pudding should be made in order for it to have time to mature before Christmas day. And Canon Mandy is having a splendid online celebration of this tradition; I encourage all of you to get out your wooden spoons and participate!

But whether or not you need to make your own puddings, today is the day that you need to stir yourself up to thinking how you are going to mark Advent, not just as a run-up to Christmas, but as a mini-Lent, requiring a personal audit of your lives. And we need to do this on a regular basis, and in a few weeks' time, when we celebrate the birthday of Christ the king, we need to be able to say "I am doing the very best I can in the circumstances" and if that is true, Christ the king will say to us "truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Stir up we beseech thee o lord, the wills of thy faithful people, that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded through Jesus Christ our lord. Amen.