

I have had the privilege of speaking here occasionally, on a Sunday, for over 20 years. During that time I've received a lot of varying feedback. One that comes to mind was "Jane, it isn't always necessary to bring your talks back to the cross". Well, I'm not so sure but the thing I am certain of is that for me it is always necessary to make Jesus central to what I'm saying. My desire is always to share my love of Christ with you. To try to impart my wonder at who He is and what He has done for us. So what better day to do this than Christ the King Sunday.

As many of you know I am an Ignatian Spiritual Director. I am qualified to lead people through the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises (Don't worry if you've never heard of these). In order to complete my training I needed to pray the Spiritual Exercises myself. So in 2018 I spent 5 weeks at a Retreat house doing just that. It was an amazingly blessed experience, one that I continue to be nurtured by.

One of the meditations used in the Spiritual Exercises is entitled "The call of the King". You are asked to compare and contrast an earthly king/leader, maybe a hero of yours, someone you admire (male or female), with Jesus, King Jesus. What are they both like as leaders? Listing out their qualities and characteristics. We might say the earthly leader is a very charismatic speaker, people are attracted to him. He works hard, seems really interested in his people but does he have time for individuals, does he know you personally? To what degree would he suffer for you? What is his underlying motivation? Do we see a thirst for power? Is there pride and selfish ambition?

Then we ponder all we know of King Jesus. The Bible tells us
" being in very nature God, Jesus did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.
Rather he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross."
(familiar words from Philippians 2).

From everything we read in the Bible, in addition to our own personal experience we see that King Jesus, has no pride and is always serving others. Jesus' character is full of mercy, compassion and love, totally self giving. Jesus loves each person unconditionally, so much so that he suffers an agonising criminal's death thinking of each of us so that we can be with Him for eternity. In an earthly leader we often see a love of power but in Jesus we only see the power of love. Jesus' motivating force is love and only love.

We ask ourselves which king do we want to follow?

Turning to today's Bible readings. The prophet Daniel said " His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed". A king has a kingdom and it's the kingdom of God that Daniel is referring to here. But as we are talking about King Jesus today I'll continue to refer to the Kingdom of Jesus. Our human life can feel so uncertain. It's the kingdom of Jesus that provides us with solid unshakeable ground that cannot be destroyed.

Our reading from John relates part of Pilate's questioning of Jesus just prior to the crucifixion. It's a fascinating interchange. Compact and direct. I imagine Pilate had no idea what to make of Jesus. He can see that if the Jewish people want Jesus as their leader, their King, then it's no wonder the chief priests view Jesus as a threat and are out to get Him. Ever the politician, Pilate asks "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus replies "My kingdom is not of this world". Jesus is saying yes I am a King, but of a kingdom that is different to the type you know. We often refer to it as an "upside down" kingdom.

A couple of aspects of Jesus' kingdom I'd like to share here.

Firstly, the size of Jesus kingdom. In saying "my kingdom is not of this world" I don't think Jesus is just referring to heaven, He is acknowledging that He is Lord of far more than Israel. Jesus' kingdom is infinite, it extends further than we can imagine. Pilate is limiting Jesus to just being King of the Jews, a concept he can recognise and deal with, maintain control.

I think we do this all the time. Reduce Jesus to a size we can manage. On the one hand Jesus deals in minute detail, sustains every cell of our bodies. Jesus gives us "life and breath and everything else", as St Paul says (Acts 17), and on the other we ponder the vastness of the universe, and proclaim that Jesus is King of all that too. The one who keeps the planets in orbit. It's all just too big for us!

Secondly, the fact that Jesus' kingdom works on different parameters to those we are used to in human life. As we mentioned earlier Jesus is fully human whilst at the same time being fully divine. There is a both/and ness about Jesus. He knows and has experienced our personal struggles, pain and grief whilst at the same time sustaining the universe. Our ultimate hope is that Jesus' kingdom is a place where there will be no more war, pain, or tears.

This is hard for us because we are so used to our earthly kingdom. Our "either/or" kingdom, that largely runs on transactional lines. I read recently "We live in a commodity propelled society that specialises in control and entertainment." We expect a day's pay for a day's work. It was the same in Jesus' day too. Remember the parable of the vineyard owner who had to deal with grumpy workers because he paid the same to those who had worked just one hour as those who had worked all day. This is the way the Kingdom of Jesus operates, it's the economy of gift.

I wonder how do we respond to being given gifts? It's an ideal time to think about this with Christmas coming up. If someone gives us an expensive gift do we feel in their debt. Maybe we think "oh that's kind but how can I repay them?" We tend to be transactional contrasting with Jesus who gives, and gives and gives. Pours out His very life for us. His generosity can never be outdone. This is the sort of King Jesus is! There is no one like Him! All we can do is receive with gratitude, recognise and respond to His love for us.

May I invite you to join with me in worshiping our amazing King Jesus by singing this simple chorus together.