

Potters Wood Methodist Church

Pows Road, Kingswood, Bristol. BS15 9QA

11am Sunday 24 November 2024

Christ the King Sunday

Lectionary:

Daniel 7:9-10,13-14

Psalm 93

Revelation 1:4b-8

John 18:33-37

Sermon

As we've already considered, this is Christ the King Sunday.

As we prepare to welcome the baby of Bethlehem we are first reminded that this is not just any baby, it will be the baby who becomes the promised Messiah, Lord of Lords, Prince of Peace, King of Kings and so many other honorific titles that we ascribe to Jesus.

In our modern age we don't really pay that much attention to Kings in some respects.

King Charles has the position of King, but we seldom see much of his Kingship – most of the time we are shown an older man in a nice suit and a nice car – but not what you might otherwise imagine a King to be.

At his coronation we saw something of the 'majesty' of King Charles – with the fancy clothes, the symbols of kingship with the orb and the sceptre, the sword, and even the crown – and yet at the height of the ceremony, immediately before the actual crowning, all his fancy garments are removed and he is taken from the sight of the people, in just a 'simple' shirt and privately anointed with oil. A symbolic reminder that even as the King of Great Britain and the Commonwealth, he is ultimately subservient to God – and in this to Jesus the King.

Queen Elizabeth II chose as one of her funeral hymns Charles Wesley's hymn – Love Divine all Loves Excelling, which includes the phrase;

changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise!

It is said that she commented of this verse how she longed to be in the position to throw her crown at the feet of Jesus – recognising that Christ the King outranked even her... Showing so fully both her strong personal faith and her recognition that as an earthly monarch she was there to serve the real King.

Our lectionary readings may seem strange in many ways, but are an attempt by various writers to describe the Kingship of God.

Daniel describes a throne room. His intention is to show a picture of God as beyond human imagination. It's not supposed to be a literal description of God, yet so much of it has in some ways come into our contemporary thinking of God – old man, white hair and beard, on a throne with thousands serving him...

As I say though, not a literal picture. As we think more about God we have grown to understand that God is so much more than this.

God is not male or female, rather God is *both* male and female *and* much more beyond this.

Daniel describes one “like a human being” who emerges from the clouds and is presented to God.

There is a reminder in this of the creation story where God creates the first human ‘in our own image’ – so one like a human being is also one like God...

As Christians this has been interpreted to represent Jesus, who as we approach Advent and Christmas, we remember is that wonderful expression of God made human who lived among us. But here Daniel reminds us that Jesus is given ‘dominion and glory and kingship’ for all peoples to serve him in an eternal dominion with a kingship that will never be destroyed.

This is an image of colossal power – beyond anything we might imagine.

How does this compare to our experience of Kings, or rulers.

Look around our world as things are. We face the prospect of another Trump presidency. Ushered in on a campaign claiming almost messianic authority and power – and yet for most of us, in language that could not be further from that of the gospel of a loving God.

I work at Bristol Baptist College and one of our teaching staff, Revd Dr Helen Paynter, has recently published a book “The Church, the Far Right and the Claim to Christianity”. The book describes how;

In recent years, far-right organisations have invaded mosques across the UK with army-issued Bibles, declaring their actions a 'Christian crusade'. Others have paraded large crosses through Muslim-majority areas, and invaded 'migrant hotels,' harassing residents in their so-called crusade.

Far-right appeals to ‘clean up society’, and ‘restore Christian Britain’ can be quite attractive to some Christians.

However, what they may fail to appreciate is that this rhetoric may be cynically employed by those whose allegiance and values are quite contrary to Christian ones.

We've seen these tactics employed in the US by Trump, but equally in the UK groups such as Reform UK, have picked up these similar tactics – appealing to a return to ‘British’ ‘Christian’ values that have been twisted from anything biblically recognisable.

Helen points out that;

Despite all this, the response from official church sources in the UK has been notably subdued, and resources to help churches address hate crimes or racial tensions are scarce. This book aims to fill that void. Bringing together insights from theologians, church practitioners, and leading experts, this volume examines the church's response to the rise of far-right thinking in UK society and explores how it can respond more effectively.

In John's Gospel we have heard Jesus' response to Pilate's attempt to find out if Jesus was King of the Jews...

This is such a tense, dramatic encounter.

John's account of the arrest and trials of Jesus is highly politicised.

The Jewish authorities have arrested Jesus and he has been questioned by the religious authorities, but being unable themselves to condemn him to death they take him to Pilate – the only one who could order this. They drop their religious objections to Jesus because they know that Pilate would not be interested and instead they level a political charge – that Jesus is trying to usurp the Roman's power and lead a rebellion.

This is why Pilate asks “are you the King of the Jews”.

Jesus' response is somewhat challenging because he asks Pilate whether Pilate is asking this himself or just following a line others have fed him. If you compare this to a modern Police interview, Jesus in effect is answering ‘No Comment’, and it has the desired effect of making Pilate very cross.

I've sat in on countless Police interviews over the years and am always impressed by the way our Police keep their temper when constantly given the ‘no comment’ answer – and try to find different ways to ask the same question in the hope of eliciting a more useful answer, while also developing evidence if the case goes to court that they gave the suspect every possible opportunity to explain themselves.

So Pilate rephrases his question, almost kindly, pointing out that he is not a Jew, he has no problem with Jesus, so what has Jesus done to upset his own people so much that they have handed him over to the hated Romans. Pilate seems to be intrigued, he was no fool, he would have realised that the Jewish authorities were playing games in their desperate attempt to get Jesus killed. And Pilate did not like being manipulated like this, so he is looking for opportunity to annoy the Jews by refusing to do what they want.

At this point Jesus explains that his Kingdom is not of this world and Pilate jumps on this as a confession that Jesus *is* a king – but Jesus is too clever to be caught like this and points out that is *not* what he said, it is Pilate's choice of words. Jesus points out that he was born and came here to testify to truth, and that those who are truthful will listen to him.

It may sound like playing games, but if you think of the Daniel reading, Jesus is represented as the one ‘like a human being’. By coming to earth as a baby Jesus is sent

by God the Father (the King described in the Daniel reading). So Jesus is truthfully answering Pilate that, at that point, he is not the King – God is – but Jesus is part of God’s Kingdom – so his kingdom (the one of which he is a loyal member) is not from this world.

This is an important distinction that we can also lean on – we are subjects of God, as such God (and as part of the Godhead) Jesus, is *our* King. But this is Kingship of our heavenly kingdom – it does not place us in conflict with King Charles III and the earthly state of which we are also members. But it is where our ultimate loyalty must lie as Christians.

This is also therefore where our future hope sits as described in the Revelation reading.

In Revelation we see a future vision of the potential return of God, coming on the clouds with all seeing it.

The heart of this is the great cry of kingship that God is “the Alpha and Omega” – a reference to the first and last letter of the Greek alphabet which Revelation was written in. We might say I am the A and the Z – the beginning and the end, the first and the last, or as Revelation says the God who is, and was, and is to come – the Almighty God/King of all time.

Forget Doctor Who – this is a picture of the ultimate timelord.

So we come full circle into a reminder of Jesus as part of the Godhead, therefore the King above all others, who has always been and will always be, and yet who, we prepare to welcome as the God that became part of their own creation, in what we call the incarnation...

Our God contracted to a span
Incomprehensively, made man.

That is the heart of Christ the King, and most importantly, the heart of the gospel of Christmas and Emmanuel – God with Us...

AMEN