

Now may I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the feast day of Christ the King. It's not an ancient feast day, in fact it only starts in the Roman Catholic church after the first World War, largely in response to the carnage of that war. We were talking about it in our staff meeting on Tuesday and I owned up to the fact that it's not a feast for which I have any particular affection and the staff quite rightly reminded me that I should take an interest in the feast of Christ the King given that our sanctuary is dominated by an image behind me of Christ the King of our Christus Rex, so each week as we gather for worship, we see an image of Christ the King, so it is fitting that we think at least once a year of what it means to worship Christ as King.

One thing I noticed when I responded to that challenge to think more deeply about this theme is that I noticed that the gospel of John for which we've heard today has a theme of the Kingship of Jesus running through it and it's quite an important strand in the gospel. What we've heard read just now is actually just a small excerpt of a much longer dialogue that Jesus has with Pilate the night or soon before he died. In a book of 21 chapters, St. John devotes a whole chapter's worth to this discussion between Jesus and Pilate, so clearly he thought there was something important going on here that he needed to describe.

John goes into more conversation about Jesus's encounter with Pilate who was ruling over Judea on behalf of the Romans. He gives it more weight than any other gospel writer and it's perhaps important to him because this encounter highlights the theme of Kingship, which as I've said is important in the gospel and starts right in the first chapter where we read in Chapter 1 that Nathaniel names Jesus as the son of God and King of Israel. The theme carries on. For example, on Palm Sunday when Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey, the crowd welcome Him and shout, "Blessed is the King of Israel." He rides on a donkey to fulfill the prophecy in Zechariah. "Do not be afraid oh daughter of Zion," it says. "See your King is coming and seated on a donkey's colt."

John portrays Jesus as King but the fact it's not the kind of Kingship, that Jesus isn't the kind of King that we're used to. That comes out most clearly in this encounter in Pilate's headquarters. Pilate summons Jesus and asks the leading question, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Remember, by this stage, Jesus has been arrested, beaten, and bound, and as he stands before Pilate, he's not looking at his most regal, and from this point on things take a deeply ironic turn. We're presented with the ludicrous situation of a tin pot Roman prefect interrogating God's Messiah seemingly with Pilate holding all the cards and it's him who's standing in Jesus' seating.

Later on, Pilate attempts to pull rank on Jesus. He says, "Do you not know that I have the power to release you? The power to crucify you?" As we know as the story unfolds, Pilate is actually reluctant to use that power. "I find no case against Jesus," he says more than once and yet, at the end he gives in to the baying crowd and he dresses Jesus up. He gives Him a crown, he gives Him a crown of thorns. He puts on a royal color, purple, dresses Him in a purple robe and he puts an inscription over the cross, which says, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

Then he presents Jesus to the crowd. He leads Him out and presents Jesus to the crowd below and says, "Here is your King", mocking. Deeply ironic, and John uses that irony and he writes his gospel and crafts it in such a way that the Kingship of Jesus comes out most clearly as Jesus is crucified in a way that Pilate said but would never understand. He presents Jesus truly as the King. Jesus is depicted as King whilst nailed to a cross.

Christ the King subverts all that Pilate and we all naturally understand as Kingship. Jesus is King but not as we know it. Let me offer two particular "but not" statements. Jesus has power and authority as King, but not as the world knows it. Pilate thought he was the one in authority, but how wrong he was. At the end of Matthew's gospel we read this, Jesus says, "All authority in Heaven and Earth has been given to me." Jesus was comfortable with the authority he'd been given by His father.

At one point, He heals someone simply to demonstrate that He has the authority to forgive sins.

At another point, He calms a storm to show that He has authority over nature, but the authority He wielded was different to the worldly power that Pilate was familiar with. It wasn't the power of military might. If it was as Jesus said to Pilate, "My followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over." It wasn't that kind of power that Jesus has, His authority wasn't a kind that Pilate could recognize. He wielded the power of love.

Jesus wasn't a King that came to be served, rather He came to serve. He wasn't a King that came to defeat His enemies, He was a King that came to pray for His enemies. He wasn't a King intent on hitting back harder, He came as a King that turned the other cheek, yet this was a King who could win a victory no other King has ever won, He won a victory over the greatest power that we know, death. On the cross, love conquered death, which is why when Pilate thought Jesus was at His weakest, John the gospel writer knows that Jesus the King is at His strongest.

Jesus said, "When I am lifted up on the cross, I will draw everyone to myself." Jesus knew of the power of love and the effect it would have. The greatest victory won by any King was the victory over death that Jesus won on the cross. No King, no Emperor, no military leader, has ever won a victory over death, only King Jesus. Love conquered all.

As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that." We remember today that our King Jesus is all powerful and that the power He wields is the power of love. Jesus has power but not as the world knows it, and Jesus has a kingdom but not as the world knows it. Jesus says to Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world," and He goes on, "My kingdom is not from here."

Pilate only knew of kingdoms that were territorial and institutional, but Jesus's upside-down kingdom was spiritual. It's based not on land, but on relationships. Jesus rules wherever his reign is recognized and there's a sense therefore that His kingdom has already come. It's come amongst His believers. He's King of their hearts as they submit to Him as King of their lives. Jesus says to His disciples, "The Kingdom is within you or among you."

To acknowledge Jesus as King is to let Him reign in our hearts and lives. It's to acknowledge that we're the subjects of the King of kings, and there's a picture in Berlin that presents a stark reminder of what that needs to look like. It's a painting by the painter Menzel and it's a picture that's meant to be of King Fredrick of Germany surrounded by his generals. Menzel painted in great detail all the generals, who are very recognizable but there's a large empty patch in the middle of the canvas where the King was meant to be because unfortunately, Menzel died before he could paint the picture, but there it hangs in the gallery. A picture of a King with no King.

As we paint the picture of our lives with the details in the surrounding, edges of the canvas, let's not forget to begin with the most important character, to put Jesus, the King of Kings, in the center -- to start there and then all the other details will fall into place. The kingdom is here, it's amongst us, it's within us, and there's also a sense in which the Kingdom of Jesus is yet to come. We acknowledge that in our service as we pray the Lord's prayer, "Your Kingdom Come." We'll say it in our creed when we say, "Jesus will come again and His Kingdom will have no end."

But I should finish there because next Sunday is Advent Sunday and the theme of Advent is this coming kingdom, the future aspect which is yet to be seen. I'll leave you with the thought of Jesus as King but not as we know it -- Jesus as King, as represented behind me in our own Christus Rex: Jesus the crucified King, the King of kings who reigns from His cross.

Amen.