

Sermon for the Festival of Christ the King (the Sunday next before Advent) – 25th November 2018

Readings:

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

Revelation 1:4b-8

John 18:33-37

You might think it a little odd to have that reading at this time of year. As you're probably aware, it's part of the story of Jesus' trial which led up to him being crucified. It might seem more appropriate to Good Friday or Holy Week than the run up to Christmas. But these few weeks before the start of Advent are what's known as the "Kingdom Season", with today specially celebrated as the festival of Christ the King, and, in that short extract from the trial story, Jesus tells Pilate something about his kingdom and what sort of king he is. If you have one of the church Bibles you may like to have it open at that reading – John 18:33-37 on p 110 of the New Testament section. We'll be coming back to it in a minute.

But something we need to remember is that the kingdom – the kingdom of God – was the central theme of Jesus' teaching. A couple of weeks ago, in this kingdom season, we read Mark's account of how Jesus started his ministry. It said, "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news.'"¹

The good news, the Gospel, that Jesus proclaimed was that the kingdom of God was near. The good news wasn't just about forgiveness of sins, though that was a very important part of it, as was repentance. And the kingdom was something the people were looking for – not least as a result of prophecies like the one we read from Daniel, which speaks of "one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven...To him were given dominion and glory and kingship."² The coming of the kingdom of God meant that God was going to act in the world, indeed in his whole creation, and move to transform it and set up his rule, his reign and show his ultimate authority. And, according to Daniel, he would do it through "one like a human being" who would have kingship for ever. That person was, of course, going to be Jesus.

Now, we live in a kingdom – the United Kingdom. It's a place, quite apart from being somewhere that has a king or queen as head of state. But the word that's translated "kingdom" in our Bibles doesn't really mean a place – it might better be translated "realm" or "reign" or "kingship" – that's the word used in our reading from Daniel. It was much more about "who" than it was about "where". It was about the king, not the country. And, for the people, it was about how the king would rule rather than where.

None the less, of course, as we know from some of the stories in the Gospels, the people were inclined to think of it in territorial terms, with a king who would have an army and give them independence from the Romans. On occasions they tried to make Jesus into that kind

¹ Mark 1:14-15

² Daniel 7:13-14

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of king – and he had to get away from them³. And when the Jewish leaders brought Jesus to Pilate in order to get him crucified they probably accused Jesus of claiming to be king – that sort of king – something Pilate would surely not tolerate.

Our reading from John's Gospel tells us something of what happened between Jesus and Pilate when they met. Pilate begins with a straight question to Jesus – “Are you the King of the Jews?”

Jesus doesn't answer that question – he asks another – “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?” It seems Jesus wants to know whether the chief priests had made a direct accusation to Pilate that Jesus was claiming to be a king, or whether Pilate had somehow formed his own opinion – perhaps even glimpsed something of the truth. It might affect what sort of answer Jesus gave.

But it's Pilate's turn not to answer the question. He reminds Jesus that it was his own people – the people he might be claiming to be king of – who handed him over. He then asks simply and directly – “What have you done?”

Jesus more or less returns to the first question – “Are you the King of the Jews?” He says, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over...but as it is my kingdom is not from here.”

This is, of course, getting to the heart of the matter. The kingdom is not something Jesus is trying to set up in defiance of Roman authority. Pilate – and indeed Caesar – need have no fear of that. Even so, Pilate probes a bit further – “So you are a king?”

Jesus' slightly awkward-sounding reply, “You say that I am a king” is probably a way of saying “yes”. But he follows it with an assertion that he was born and had come into the world to testify to the truth, and that those who belong to the truth listen to him.

What is the truth to which Jesus testifies? Our reading ends there, but if we had read on we would find Pilate asking much the same question – “What is truth?” Pilate didn't hang about for an answer – his question was probably a sign of disdain, not a desire to know what truth was. But if we do want to find out the truth – the truth about the kingdom, the truth to which Jesus testified, we need to go back to all that Jesus taught and said and, as he says here, listen to him.

All that Jesus taught and said – well, there's a lot of that, and I'm not going to try to summarise it all. Practically everything that Jesus taught was about life in the kingdom. I'll just give you a few examples. Many of Jesus' parables begin “The kingdom of God is like....”. So Jesus tells us, in one parable, that the kingdom is like treasure hidden in a field, which

³ John 6:15

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someone is prepared to sell everything to get⁴. In another he tells us it's like yeast that is put in the dough and changes the whole loaf – the kingdom changes everything⁵.

And then every miracle was a sign that God was at work in the world exercising his reign and authority. As Jesus says in at least one place, "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you"⁶.

Then we have that time in Nazareth when Jesus preached in the synagogue and read from the prophecy of Isaiah;

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."⁷

The year of the Lord's favour was another way of speaking about the kingdom and Jesus said to the people after he had read the passage that "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"⁸. So the kingdom was near – and it was a realm of good news for the poor – an end to their poverty, perhaps – and of release for captives, healing for the blind, freedom for the oppressed. It is indeed a kingdom of justice – where wrongs are put right – and of joy.

Those words that Jesus read from Isaiah remind us that, when Jesus said to Pilate that his kingdom was not of this world, he didn't mean it was completely other-worldly and divorced from our lives today. Certainly it isn't white-robed saints with haloes sitting on clouds and playing harps! It was not of this world – a worldly kingdom like Rome or indeed other nations. But, even though it has a future, heavenly dimension – Jesus spoke of going to prepare a place for us in his Father's house⁹ - it is also very much in the world – indeed, transforming it, like the yeast. As Jesus also taught, "The kingdom of God is among you"¹⁰.

And then it is a kingdom of love – as is perhaps obvious from some of the other things Jesus said and did. Love transforms, love releases, love heals, love does so much – and Jesus gives the new commandment, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another"¹¹. And there is to be a close loving relationship between himself, the king, and his people, described by Jesus as "abiding in" one another – "Abide in me as I abide in you"¹².

⁴ Matthew 13:44

⁵ Matthew 13:33

⁶ Luke 11:20

⁷ Luke 4:18-19

⁸ Luke 4:21

⁹ John 14:2

¹⁰ Luke 17:20

¹¹ John 13:34

¹² John 15:4

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Perhaps our reading from Revelation hints at a summary of what the kingdom is like. It speaks of “Jesus Christ ... ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever”¹³. Jesus is the ruler – and he has made us to be his kingdom. But he loves us – and has freed us from sin, which, if it means anything at all, means that there are no barriers between him and us – no sin which makes us unacceptable to him. The kingdom is a realm of love, and one in which we can approach God freely and enjoy that love – and he can enjoy our love for him. It’s wonderful – something worth having – like the treasure hidden in the field.

But love transforms, like the yeast. If we love God, if we love Jesus, we end up loving whatever and whoever he loves – and so we might well find ourselves wanting to bring justice and joy and good news to others – what Jesus said he was “anointed to do” when he read from the prophecy of Isaiah at Nazareth.

Are you prepared to receive that love? Is it, for you, like the treasure in the field, worth giving up something for? You probably don’t need to give up everything like the man in the parable. Are you prepared to let it change you and maybe do something to help others? Perhaps most important of all, do you desire that loving relationship with Jesus that Jesus describes as abiding in him and him abiding in you? Perhaps you have it already and would love to share it with others. If so, I’m sure you will say with me, that It’s something that comes through prayer, through worship, through reading his word, through spending time with God – even if only a few minutes a day. Are you prepared to receive that love – and give it?

¹³ Revelation 1:5-6