

Collect Prayer for the Day

Eternal Father, whose Son Jesus Christ ascended to the throne of heaven that he might rule over all things as Lord and King: keep the Church in the unity of the Spirit and in the bond of peace, and bring the whole created order to worship at his feet; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

God the Father, help us to hear the call of Christ the King and to follow in his service, whose kingdom has no end; for he reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, one glory.

First Bible Reading Daniel Chapter 7:9-10,13-14

As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire.

A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousand served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgement, and the books were opened. As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. *NRSV*

Second Reading Revelation Chapter 1: 4b-8

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the 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. Amen.

Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. 'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. *NRSV*

Gospel Reading John 18:33-37

Pilate asked Jesus, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' Jesus answered, '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 to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' *NRSV*

Christ the King Rev. Sara Davies

All being well our Queen, Elizabeth, will celebrate her Platinum Jubilee next year, seventy years on the throne, our longest serving monarchy. Recent reports of ill health have caused considerable alarm, whilst people perhaps forget that it is unusual for someone to get to 95 years of age without having some sort of health issue. Whether or not you support the monarchy, I think that there can be no doubt that this is a woman who has dedicated her life to the service of her people. Whilst many see the advantages of being born into royalty, our Queen has lived a life of sacrifice, putting the nation first at the expense of normal family life, making her own choices in how she spends her time and those she spends it with. I am sure that it is hard trying to live up to people's expectations of you. In recent times the role of a monarch has been recognised as a figurehead, an ambassador for this country, but of course that hasn't always been the case.

I have been reading this book recently and learning of monarchs throughout the years and the effect they had on the lives of the ordinary people that they served. Fighting wars, amassing money and murder seem to come up regularly. Some of the worst monarchs in recent polls include Edward 2nd, Mary Queen of Scots, Henry 8th, James 2nd and I was reading about William Rufus (II) (King of England 1087-1100). Writeups don't come much worse than this King's, who was described by one chronicler as "hateful to his people and odious to God. The time he didn't spend fighting he spent thinking up more ways to earn money, manipulating both feudal law and the workings of the Church to benefit the royal coffers.

And so we turn to think about today, the last Sunday of the liturgical year known as Christ the King Sunday, where we encouraged, as Christians, to think about our own understanding of kingship and what Christ's Kingdom means to us. The readings we hear are rich with examples that the kingship Christ speaks of is nothing like any human, earthly concept of royalty.

It was also difficult to those living in the first century to understand Jesus. Being a king really meant something in Jesus' day. A king was the most powerful human being on earth; when a king spoke, common people trembled, so pretty much how it was for our own ancestors in this country. For many nations, the king was the only means of securing order and peace. The king was civilization and domestic tranquillity personified in one person. He was to be honoured and respected and served. He was to be revered and feared and obeyed. A king was everything and everybody rolled up into one. He was of upmost importance - so much so that time itself was calculated on the basis of when the King began his reign. For example, 'In the fifth year of the reign of Julius Caesar', 'In the twenty-fifth year of the reign of King David'.

Today's first reading is from the book of Daniel. Daniel was taken as a young Jew to exile in Babylon. There he had a series of visions. In ancient traditions, visions and dreams were glimpses of divine revelations. They were very symbolic and the symbols had to be interpreted for anything to make sense. Ultimately this literary form was a message of hope to an embattled nation. We hear of Daniel, revealing the triumphant one, 'like the Son of Man' (human form), coming on a cloud (a symbol of divinity) who is presented before the Ancient One (The One Eternal God) and is given dominion over the universe which cannot ever be overcome or destroyed. Prior to this vision, Daniel had a vision of four beasts (leaders representing kingdoms) that would terrorize the people. Now he reveals that God will triumph, and his kingdom will be represented by one who is of human form, we know this to be Jesus.

The reading from the book of Revelation is like Daniel in that it is Apocalyptic in style. This time the persecution is of the early Christians by Rome. Again, it is a reminder for these Christians to stand firm in the faith and to await the fulfilment of God's promises through Jesus despite the persecutions they are going through, even martyrdom. Those who stay true to him will arise with him to the everlasting kingdom. They will be made into a priestly kingdom glorifying the Father for ever.

We might think from these passages that yes, Jesus will be a strong ruler, a King to be feared and obeyed as people of the time would have expected. Those he served would indeed ultimately be called to honour and respect him, but as we now know, Jesus was to be a very different sort of king.

When Jesus stood trial before Pilate, Pilate's concerns were whether he was planning to set up a rebel government, whether he might be a rival king to threaten Rome. Pilate, who served the most powerful king in the world, knew what a king was. One of the rules that Pilate was called to enforce was the rule that anyone who claimed to be a king, anyone who dared to set themselves up as an authority over and against the lawful authority of Caesar, was to be executed. It was a rule that Pilate had no scruples about enforcing, it was a rule that he had enforced thousands of times throughout Galilee.

The very idea that the bruised and beleaguered man that stood before him could be taken for a king must have seemed ridiculous to Pilate. He knew what Kings acted like. He knew what they looked like. He knew what even those who pretended to be kings acted like and looked like. Nevertheless, Pilate does his duty and asks Jesus if the charge against him is true. He asks Jesus if he is, or if he claims to be, King of the Jews. Jesus answers Pilate that he is a king - but that his kingdom is not of this world, and then he says:

"If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews",

showing his kingdom is not based on violence

Pilate cannot imagine Jesus as a King, the image that he has of a King, like the image that many of us have, just doesn't fit Jesus. And so - while in the end Pilate allows Jesus to be crucified with the word's "King of the Jews" posted over his head in three different languages, Pilate himself does not believe that Jesus can be seen as a threat to Roman rule.

When Jesus says his kingdom is not of this world, he is saying that his present and future reign does not operate according to the world's criteria of power and dominance, like the rulers of the past. Jesus's type of power is not the sort of power that this world understands. And at this moment in time, our world cries out for a different sort of power and a different way of being together. At no point in the New Testament are Christians called on to take up arms as a means to establish an earthly kingdom in the name of Jesus.

In reality, Jesus came into the world for no political purpose but solely to witness to the truth, the truth about God, to testify by word and deed to his justice and at the same time to demonstrate his love, and in turn that is what we are called to do.

We can make a difference, this community here, our parish, by volunteering, running businesses with integrity, giving to charity, caring for the housebound. By the work we do to further God's kingdom for the poor, for the planet, by the relationships we have with one another. In Christ's kingdom, we are all a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and the kind of service we give to one another in love is what we are made for.

There is a well-known anecdote about the Queen when she was a young girl. One day she was wandering around one of the royal estates when a stranger asked her 'Who are you?' 'Oh, I'm no one,' she replied, 'but my father is the King.' Knowing the truth of who we are and to whom we belong can be life affirming.

Next Sunday will be Advent Sunday, when we start not only about preparing for the celebration of Jesus' birth at Christmas, but also his Second Coming at the end of time when he will come as Judge of all. I ask that we all take some time to study today's readings and think of what we can bring to Christ's Kingdom, and how we can glorify him. Amen