

## Recognising Christ as King

If my calculations are correct, that was the Gospel reading many of us heard when the Church of England first celebrated the feast of Christ the King in 1998. Repeated every three years since, maybe it's lost some of its element of surprise; but it remains provocative. How many of us feel prepared to engage with an account of Jesus' crucifixion when we are about to plunge into Advent? And if the theme of Kingship conjures up an image of Christ in majesty, richly robed and seated on a throne, it's jarring to have to picture him stripped, wounded and hanging on a cross.

An earthly reign begins with a coronation: I think I can make a case that, for Luke's Gospel in particular, Jesus' passion is equivalent to his coronation: the prelude, as he tells the disciples on the Emmaus road, to the Messiah's entry into his glory.

Back at the beginning, Gabriel told Mary that the Lord God would *give him the throne of his ancestor David*. During his ministry, it appears that people had to come to their own conclusions about Jesus' identity as Messiah / Christ: literally *the anointed one*: the divinely-appointed ruler of David's line (and therefore a king). Jesus didn't explicitly proclaim himself as such until his entry into Jerusalem on a donkey: a prophetic action inspired by a prophecy of Zechariah. Luke compresses the crowd's two-fold acclamation in Mark's Gospel by having them insert the title *king* into the quotation from Psalm 118: *Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!*

When the Jewish Council presents Jesus to Pilate in Luke, they accuse him of *saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king* – translating their religious title into a secular one of greater interest to the Roman governor. And Pilate picks this up: the title *The King of the Jews* becomes the charge above Jesus' head at his crucifixion. With irony, the Gentile soldiers taunt him with it: *If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!* The religious leaders and one of the criminals next to him continue to use the Jewish *Messiah* – but the taunt is the same. But the one we generally know as *the penitent thief* truly recognises Jesus' authority: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*. Jesus' reply implies that, with his death approaching, he is on the verge of his accession: *Today you will be with me in paradise*. Peter, speaking in the Acts of the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost, tells the crowd: *this Jesus whom you crucified, God has made both Lord and Messiah*. In the language of the coronation Psalm 110, which Jesus himself had quoted earlier in Holy Week, he takes his seat at the right hand of God.

But it's clear that the reign of Christ is somewhat different from that of Herod, or Caesar; or of King Charles III or any of his predecessors. It's not universally recognised, or reflected in the general state of the world. So how do we, who do recognise it, relate to it?

A coronation makes it clear that a monarch has authority over people, who pledge their allegiance. The penitent thief, as it were, identifies himself as a subject of Christ the King. As do we: we acknowledge, submit to, embrace his rule, his authority over our hearts and lives. Baptised in him, we are his people.

The penitent thief didn't address Jesus directly as King, but referred to his kingdom. An earthly monarch has a domain, as well as subjects. Even if Jesus didn't directly refer to himself as king, he taught a lot about the kingdom of God – which also translates as the rule of God. In this world, the kingdom of God consists of those situations and people in which God's nature and influence is evident: where God is clearly at work. So the second way, I suggest, that we relate to Christ as King is by learning to recognise, discern, highlight his rule in the world. Jesus has given us plenty of clues: in the things he pointed out in his daily ministry; in the stories he told; in his own actions. *Where much has been forgiven, much love is shown ... she, in her poverty, has given more than all these ... your faith has made you well ... there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over 99 righteous people who need no repentance.* We can do the same, in our daily lives: as he said, the kingdom of God is among us. And it will be a healthy antidote to the media's focus on events which suggest that forces other than the incarnate love of God are directing our world.

In the reading from Jeremiah, the rule of God is clearly being frustrated by those in control: the *shepherds* (who may well be kings of Judah). The sheep are not being tended; indeed they are scattered and therefore vulnerable. So the Lord promises to intervene; and in due course to appoint new shepherds, who will securely regather the flock, that all may flourish. Our role doesn't end with recognition of Christ's domain: if we see Jesus as the *righteous Branch* of Jeremiah's prophecy, reigning as king and dealing wisely, then his execution of *justice and righteousness in the land* is ours to promote and implement. Jesus taught his followers to pray for the coming of God's kingdom and reflect it in our relationships and actions. Not to bury our talent, but to invest it. To act as neighbour to those in need. To go the extra mile and pray for our persecutors. Jesus' parables of seeds and yeast show that, whatever the state of the Church or Christian faith, the kingdom of God is always growing: our mission is to participate in that growth through evangelism (increasing the number of his subjects) and action (widening his domain).

That is how we best anticipate the day of its full dawning: something we will look forward to in the coming season of Advent. And which is reflected in the collect for today:

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.