

- HYMNS:**
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| 1 | "All people that on earth do dwell" |
| 347 | "Crown him with many crowns" |
| 312 | "The head that once was crowned with thorns" |
| 319 | "Christ triumphant, ever reigning" |
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READINGS: Revelation 1:4-8
John 18: 33-37

**"THE KINGDOMS OF THIS WORLD AND
THE KINGDOM OF OUR GOD"**

Next Sunday is the first Sunday in Advent – the Christmas tree will be up, we will light the first Advent candle, the Sunday School will be preparing their play and the first of the Advent choirs will be singing. It will be the run-up to Christmas – the season in which Christians prepare to receive the child Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us.

But today has a name in the Christian calendar also – it is the Feast or Festival of Christ the King or of the Reign of Christ as some people prefer to call it. I can tell you that never before in my 41 years as a preacher have I preached on the theme of "Christ the King." In fact I, and I suspect many of you, had never heard of this special Sunday until very recently. This year I decided to do a bit of investigation into the history of this special Sunday ... and it is very interesting.

Firstly this special day of the Feast of Christ the King is a very recent addition to the Church calendar. It dates back only to 1925 and to Pope Pius the XI and was a response to the aftermath of the First World War. Pope Pius XI had a great concern about the growing nationalism in the world and particularly in Europe as well as about the growing secularism of the world.

Pope Pius' intention was to emphasise the very different notion of Kingship that we see in Jesus – a universal kingship spanning not only space but time. The Pope was holding up a non-violent concept of kingship and rule in the face of the growing brutality of Mussolini's fascism which he saw all around him in Italy.

With the adoption of a revised lectionary of Scripture readings by all the mainline churches in 1996 – the feast came from the Catholic Church into other churches which had till then not adopted it. The Feast of Christ the King has not been strongly emphasised within the Methodist Church and I am pretty sure that this will not be the theme for the day in many other Methodist Churches.

But there is a very important and topical issue addressed on this Feast Day – it is the contrast between the type of kingship that Jesus brings and the sort of kingship or political leadership and rule exercised by Kings, Queens, Presidents, Emperors and the like in our day.

And there is another issue – a very tricky issue about what is or should be the relationship between the church and the state, between people who owe loyalty to Christ and are yet citizens of a nation.

It is a topical issue in many ways but not least, in our current context, because one of the accusations that Muslims level at Christians concerns the Crusades of the Middle Ages, when knight's with the symbol of the cross on their shield and blessed by Archbishops went off to fight to reclaim Jerusalem from what they termed 'the infidels' – Jews and Muslims. The Crusades were a religiously sanctioned war. We would do well not to forget our own history.

In this case, as in others over the history of this nation, the Christian faith was co-opted for a nationalistic and militaristic purpose. There are some parallels to be drawn with the position of Islam in our contemporary world.

The relationship between a strong religious faith and the state in which it exists has always been a tense one.

- The Roman authorities were suspicious of the early Christians aware that they were not completely loyal citizens willing to give undivided honour to the Emperor god.
- Throughout mediaeval Europe there were wars fought to enforce their own faith – Catholic or Protestant – as the faith of the whole people. Those who refused to toe the line were killed.
- In the First World War the Church in this country and others, with some notable and brave exceptions, supported the stand of the nation and acted as a recruiting sergeant for the army and then blessed the soldiers as they went off to fight.
- In South Africa the Dutch Reformed Church gave the state the theological basis and underpinning for the introduction of apartheid – the separation of people according to ethnic origin.

Still in our country Queen Elizabeth was, at her coronation in 1953 both invested with her constitutional powers and anointed by the Church with her spiritual powers. Indeed the only part of the Coronation Service which was not televised was the anointing of the Queen by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Will such an anointing ever take place at a coronation again, I wonder.

I could go on giving examples, both in this country and elsewhere of the ambiguous and often tense relationship between Christians, the Church as an institution and the State. Closer to our own time some of you will remember the tussle between Archbishop Runcie and Margaret Thatcher over the service for the end of the Falklands War in St. Paul's Cathedral. The Archbishop wanted to pray for the Argentinian dead and the Prime Minister most emphatically did not.

So it is against this background that I would like us to look at the Gospel Reading for today from John's Gospel. It is the story of Jesus brought, by the Jewish religious

authorities, before the Roman Governors, Pontius Pilate on the trumped up charge that he was claiming to be the King of the Jews. This reading is a record of the most dramatic political confrontation in the whole of Scripture – Pilate's interrogation of Jesus in the Roman praetorium. This trial and Jesus' subsequent execution epitomised a clash between two 'kings', two notions of 'kingdom' and the allegiance that they each solicit from us.

Let us examine the situation closely. Pilate, the Roman Governor of the area including Jerusalem, thinks he has power and indeed he does – power delegated to him by the Emperor – a power which gives him the right to release Jesus or to put him to death.

Jesus, on the other hand, appears completely powerless. The few followers that he had have run away. He certainly does not have the benefit of a band of armed men. In his heart of heart Pilate knows that it is laughable to think of Jesus as King in the normal understanding of that word – a powerful, despotic ruler.

However Jesus' answer to Pilate question, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' is both incriminating and revealing. Jesus does not reject the word or the concept of 'king' and 'kingdom.' His response is 'my kingdom is not from this world.'

Some translations of the Bible have rendered this passage, 'my kingdom is not of this world' as if Jesus is referring to the world to come, the world beyond this world. But this is a false translation – what Jesus is saying is – my kingdom is not built on the values and practices of this world – domination, economic exploitation, oppressive power and violence but on the values of God and his love for the world.

Jesus is saying that his power is derived from a completely different source. If we had continued our reading for another few verses we would have heard Jesus' claim to be the Truth and Pilate's mocking response, 'what is truth?' Jesus' kingdom strips away all the illusions on which human structures have been built over the generations.

And, as we know, Pilate allows the Jewish authorities to rob him of his real power, to box him into a corner and give in to their demands to arrest and execute Jesus – for fear that to do otherwise would mean his being reported back to Rome for his weakness.

But in another way Pilate stands out against the Jewish religious authorities – the inscription written above Jesus on the Cross – in three languages so that no-one should fail to read it - was "The King of the Jews." On that wording Pilate refused to compromise.

In this incident in front of Pilate, as in his life lived out in Galilee and Judea, Jesus announced the Kingdom of God in its simplest terms and embodied what life would be like here on earth if God were king and the current rulers were not.

If God's kingdom had come on earth instead of the kingdoms of our present nation states, every aspect of personal and communal life would experience a radical reversal.

The radical changes would be almost endless-

- peace-making instead of war-mongering
- liberation not exploitation
- sacrifice rather than subjugation
- mercy not vengeance
- care for the vulnerable instead of privileges for the powerful
- generosity not greed
- humility not hubris

The word that the ancient Hebrews had for all of this was ‘shalom’ – like the word ‘salaam’ in Arabic. O that those meanings could be retrieved and injected with love and energy – not only by Christians but by Jews and Muslims, too.

The Lord’s Prayer, which we repeat so easily, so often and so unthinkingly is actually the most subversive of all political acts. “Thy kingdom come, Lord God,” we pray, “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

This year the festival of Christ the King is being commemorated in the shadow of the atrocities committed in Beirut and Baghdad, Paris and Bamako. In the face of this senseless violence, God’s kingdom looks so far off. Working for God’s kingdom feels like a rather futile determination – not just an uphill battle but unfeasible even ridiculous – just to think that our efforts and energies can turn our world around into the world God sees it can be.

But changing the world begins with individuals and small groups of people who refuse to accept the unacceptable. We believe in a God, who, in the words of our reading from Revelation is the first and the last, the Alpha and Omega – there from everlasting to everlasting.

On this day of the feast of the reign of Christ we also need to remember that the Kingdom is not about location alone – it is realising that Jesus’ Kingdom is a state of being, a way of living and a commitment to a particular view of the world – the truth as lived out in Jesus Christ.

This is our challenge as we live in difficult and violent times.
May Christ’s kingdom come and may we take our part in bringing about its coming.
Amen