

**A Sermon preached in the
Parish Church of St Andrew Chesterton
at the Parish Communion
on the Feast of Christ the King (Year C):
24.xi.2013**

Jeremiah 23.1-6: *A righteous Branch who shall reign as king*

Colossians 1.11-20: *In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell*

Luke 23.33-43: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*

‘The Father has enabled us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son.’ (*Colossians 1.12-13*)

+ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

One of the truths of being alive is that in order really to get to *know* someone, we must spend time with them, and one of the great *gifts* of that truth is that the most valuable people in life are those who grow more and more precious to us the longer we know them. It’s very easy to put on a good show for half an hour or a day or so, and conversely it’s distressingly straightforward to make a bad impression quickly – usually when it seems to most matter, say, at a job interview or on a date. But *time* spent in someone’s company reveals the truth about them: we see them from different angles, we experience ourselves being *known* by them, the masks we make for ourselves slip away, and the people to whom we are most attracted are generally those whose kindness and generosity, insight and compassion, wisdom and

discernment – whose *goodness* – never ceases being more and more apparent to us.

So it is with Jesus Christ. And so it is that the Church crowns her year on this, its last Sunday, with the great Feast of Christ the King. We have passed a year in his company. (Perhaps some of you have come in halfway through this cycle of the journey: that's OK, there are plenty more years ahead.)

We have followed his life from the Annunciation through to his birth, his growth and maturing and the beginnings of his ministry. We have listened to his counsels and teachings. We have seen how human frailty and sinfulness rejects him who knew no sin, and bears him to the Cross where he takes the world's suffering on himself. We have seen the pitiful group of a handful of men and women stand by as a great stone is rolled to the door of the tomb. We have witnessed his Resurrection, his bursting from the tomb, and his return to the Father, taking our humanity with him. We have joined with the disciples in prayer in the Upper Room, waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit. We have celebrated the triumphs of his death and resurrection in the lives of his saints. And, thanks be to God, in the passage of this year and every year we have come *to know Jesus more*: the more we look at him, the greater he seems. It is only spending time in Jesus's company that teaches us what kind of King he is.

'Sir,' said some Greeks to the apostle Philip, 'we would see Jesus!' Well, how do we see him? Today we see him as King of kings and Lord of lords: he is, says St Paul in our epistle, the 'image of the invisible God' and we exalt him as 'head of the body', 'the beginning, the first-born from the dead', in whom 'all things hold

together' and for whom 'all things' were created. And today we also see this Jesus skewered to a cross on a hill outside a city wall. As he hangs there dying, he unites criminals, rulers and soldiers in their contempt, his only identifier a title over his head: 'THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS'.

A strange King, this – can he really be the one promised to Jeremiah, a king who will 'deal wisely' and 'execute justice and righteousness in the land', in whose days 'Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely'? He may, indeed, have saved others: he cannot save himself.

But he does not need to save himself: no-one, he says elsewhere, takes his life from him – he lays it down willingly. In the willingness, the *gratuity* of that love, his Kingship is shown. He is not King *in spite of* the Cross: being exalted as King is not his consolation prize for going through suffering and death. He is most truly King *through* the Cross because, as St Paul says later in our epistle, that was the means by which he established peace, the means by which God reconciled all things to himself. To see Jesus truly is to take our place with the penitent thief and say to him *while crucified*, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' The head that once was crowned with thorns is crowned with glory now.

Since Michaelmas at the end of September we have been reflecting in a series of Sunday morning sermons on our fellowship with the saints, with holy people of every age – with St Michael the Archangel, with St Francis the Poor Man of Assisi, with St Edward, King and Confessor, with St Luke the Evangelist and Physician, with Martin Luther the Reformer, with St Martin

of Tours, Soldier and Bishop, and with the Melanesian Martyrs. And we have learned that the saints are not people removed from us by the acreage of sanctity, but are men and women who have thrown caution to the winds, *taken fully hold of the baptism which is theirs and ours* and become icons to point others in the direction of the mystery of Jesus Christ. They are the joy-filled ambassadors of the Kingdom; they are windows onto the *shape* of Christ's Kingship. There he is in majesty in our great East window, surrounded by his saints: and in his hand the book which reads, 'I am the first and the last and the living one: I was dead, and see, I am alive for ever.'

The saints give us an insight into that which is most real, most true. In their frailty and their fragility, they share the weakness and shame of the Cross and they receive its victory. In disregarding the hollow promises of the world and setting out on Love's great Adventure of self-giving, they show us that to be under Christ's kingship is not to be submissive to an imperial jackboot and is not to *lose* personality or identity. It is *to find it*. It is to find total and radical *freedom*: the freedom for which we long.

This is because when we receive Christ's kingship we receive him who is 'before all things', 'in whom all things hold together', through whom God has 'reconciled' to himself 'all things' – so Christ's kingship liberates us from our narrow tribalism, the instinctive ways in which we have to shore up our identity and defend ourselves by identifying with *this* group against *that* group, and judging *these* people better than *those* people. Christ, the crucified and risen Victim, overcomes division, and when we accept him we can never be at home in sectarianism again.

We are free, and our life is hid with Christ in God. As St Paul tells us, ‘when Christ, who is our life, shall appear, we also shall appear with him in glory.’ Christ is not only King *over* us, but when we see him on Calvary, we see that he is King *for* us. We say that he reigns from the Cross not because it was all some great play and really everything was okay all along, but precisely because he gives himself in the vulnerability of unflinching love *and stays like that* all the way to the end. The Cross proclaims that love reigns, and that perfectly faithful love is not a concept, but a Person. And because his dying love is personal, in him, we too have will have our own Easter, our own Ascension, because he ever lives to make intercession for us at the Father’s hand.

Today we are not celebrating Christ as some sort of ecclesiastical go-getter who climbs to the top of the heavenly pile. We are celebrating the reality of Jesus Christ as the one ‘by whom and with whom and in whom’ ‘all honour and glory’ is given to the Father. Today is the feast of the *primacy* and *totality* of Jesus Christ, Christ ‘all in all’. Today completes and crowns the year and finishes our ‘season of saints’ by blasting out the Good News that Christianity is *not* a system or a project, not a philosophy or a theory, not a set of rules or an adjunct to life’s variegated interests: no, Christianity is simply and only Jesus Christ – and Jesus Christ is not a general or vague abstraction, but is *personal* and *particular*: the Father’s mesmerising, redeeming Word to us, to you and to me. *This* is the ‘inheritance of the saints in light.’

Yesterday somebody asked me what this *looks* like, Christ becoming ‘all in all’. But in lots of ways this is an impossible question: you might just as well ask what it *looks* like to be in love, or what it *looks* like when the oppressed go free, or what it

looks like when, one day, we wake up and find we see the world through different eyes. The fullness of Christ is known only in *encounter*, not in *looking* from the outside in... and it is an encounter which is inexhaustible. It is a discovery made on love's highway: an encounter which we make in the corporate life of the Church, and an encounter which we make in the particular friends of Jesus, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned.

A better question might be: "Does Christ's Kingship shine out in my life?" This is a good day to ask it: as every Christian year passes on its way, every rotation allows the divine potter to press his hands on us and shape the clay of his making, and form us into the image of this Jesus, the 'image of the invisible God'. How's that going? Where are we resistant to it? Why are we resistant to it? The Feast of Christ the King recalls us to the commitment made at our baptism when the death in us died: 'Do you turn to Christ?' 'I turn to Christ.' And that *turning*, that *orientation towards Jesus* is the great and continual action of our lives: every day, 'I turn to Christ'. This is nothing to do with pretending to be more perfect than we are. It just means putting 'the whole lot' in his hands: not just everything that is best in us, or in our Church, or in our society, but also the parts of which we are ashamed or afraid, and the parts we don't even know about.

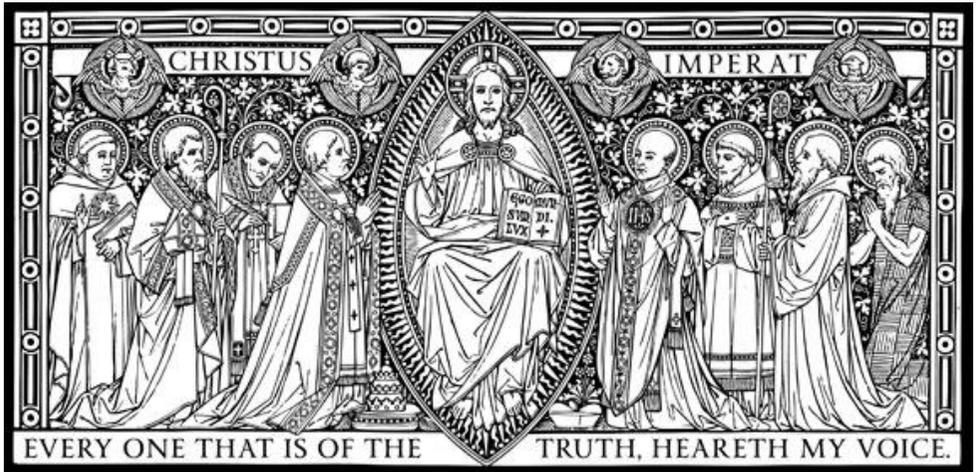
To follow on Love's Way to that place where it is more obvious than anything else that Christ is King – indeed, where that's the *only* thing that is real, and everything else is real in relation to that truth – to make *that* our goal is to commit ourselves to being more and more mirrors of that Kingship, until those around us cannot see that it can be anything other than joyful and true.

On Friday I was in Westminster Abbey for the dedication of the memorial to C.S. Lewis in Poets' Corner, and during the service these words of Lewis's were read:

It's only when you allow yourself to be drawn into His life that you turn into a true person. But, on the other hand, it's just no good at all going to Christ for the sake of developing a fuller personality. As long as that's what you're bothering about, you haven't begun... Look for Christ and you will get Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.

Another Christian year has passed: to show us the inheritance of the saints in light, to show us what kind of king Christ is, so that next week, when the wheel turns back to the beginning again, we might know more truly what it is for which we pray when we say: *Thy Kingdom come*. Even a dying thief could pray for that when he looked at Jesus.

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Amen.



***Thou art the King of glory, O Christ:
thou art the everlasting Son of the Father.***