

Jeremiah 23.1-6; Colossians 1.11-20; Luke 23.33-43

We have arrived at the last Sunday of the church calendar year! And it is now our tradition on this last Sunday of the church calendar, the end of the church year, that we think about Christ the King. Jesus as a king, THE king.

Now, royalty has been on our minds more than usual in the last few months, with the death of Queen Elizabeth, and the latest season of the TV show *The Crown* coming out just a couple of weeks ago. So I'm going to put that to use and ask you all to help me with the sermon today! I'm going to ask you some questions, hopefully you'll give me some answers, and we're going to think through kingship together!

First, I want us to think about the idea of a King or queen.

Your first question is: *what is a king?* What makes someone a king or queen?

- Birth, rules about succession, the consent of the people, politics, history...

Second question: what is the job of a monarch? What's the point of them?

- To rule, make decisions, to dispense justice, to lead, be a role model/figurehead, to have responsibility for the country, to work with other countries/monarchs, to continue the monarchy, to keep people safe

Third question: what does it mean to be a subject of a king or queen? How does it affect an individual to *have* a king or queen?

- Obey laws, identity, part of a kingdom, bigger picture, to be a representative of the country, to be accountable.

Thank you - some great ideas! Now while all of that is in your head, I want us to think about today's gospel reading. If you have your bulletin to hand, turn to the gospel passage and have a look at it. And with all the things we just said in mind, I want you to tell me everything you see there in the reading that does *not* sound like things we would associate with a king. Tell me what you see. What here does not look like kingship?

- Crucifixion, his clothing being divided, being scoffed at and mocked, being treated like a criminal, being given bad drink...

I would suggest that if anyone read this passage and didn't know anything else, they would never guess that we consider Jesus to be a king. This reading is full of pain, insults, and disrespect. This is a story of punishment and death, not seemingly one of authority and power. But what I want to do now is think back to our original questions about kingship and reframe them as we think about Christ the King. Let's shift the focus and see what happens to our answers.

So: *what makes Jesus a king?* - not chosen by people, not born to a royal family, certainly not the politics of the time. But God. Power of the Creator.

Then, *what is Jesus' role as king? What does he achieve?* This is the really interesting one I think, this is where we see a shift in the idea of what a king even is. What would you say? What does Jesus do or achieve as King?...

In our reading from the prophet Jeremiah, we hear about a king who is going to come, one who will 'deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land', but in our gospel reading Jesus is dying. A king who dies when he could have stopped it happening - how is this executing justice and righteousness? It makes no sense. But this is to do with our perception of power and authority. This is what makes Christ the King quite different to any human king we might be used to. Instead of pageantry we see a man, broken and in pain, being watched by crowds as he dies, and yet... yet there is something beautiful here. There is something that changes the world. He is being told time and time again to use his power to save himself. But he doesn't. That isn't his role as king. Instead, he does the impossible, and forgives people.

Earlier in the story, there has been a parallel with today's reading, where Pilate forgives Barabbas and frees him, because it was his privilege as ruler to do so. Now, we see Jesus forgiving the criminal on the cross and those who he prayed for, because it was his privilege to do so. This is the kingship of Christ, to say to someone 'Today you will be with me in paradise'. Now, this criminal did incredibly little to receive such abundant mercy from Jesus. He acknowledged his guilt and Jesus' innocence, and made a request that Jesus remember him, but it wasn't an obvious plea for forgiveness, or a passionate demonstration of repentance. He even admits that crucifixion is a 'just' punishment for whatever he has done. But regardless of that, Jesus uses his power as King to show mercy and love. In one moment, the authority of Jesus' rule finds this criminal worthy of being in God's presence with all the righteous (including Jesus himself).

I had a conversation with someone last week, and we were talking about all the big questions to do with God and faith. And one of the really big questions we discussed, which we find echoed in the gospels is: how much does God forgive? If we are honest, we like the idea that some people are beyond forgiveness. We want to draw a line with ourselves on one side and the 'really really bad people' on the other, and say, 'we can be forgiven, but they shouldn't be'. We are frightened at the power of evil. Yet we see Jesus' far greater power here in his simple yet extraordinary act of forgiveness. This is how Jesus rules his kingdom, with unfathomable mercy. And through such forgiveness, the power of evil is undone. It can never win, because Jesus can always forgive. Always. That's uncomfortable for us because it lumps us all together, us nice churchgoing folks who 'only sin a little bit', mixed together and treated the same as the worst people we can think of. But Jesus' power of forgiveness draws us *all* with love into paradise with him.

So, our final question: *What does it mean to be a member of Christ's kingdom?*

Just like the criminal on the cross, we are freely offered 'redemption, the forgiveness of sins'. We are invited to join Jesus in paradise, if we accept the love and mercy so abundantly held out to us. It's a hard ask, because it makes us put aside our ego and our sense of being better than anyone else. It's a hard ask because our king endures humiliation and death. It's a hard ask because it means that forgiveness is prized above all else, as it has the ultimate power.

But the joy and wholeness and fullness of life that come from membership in this strange realm are beyond measure. The kingdom of Christ is glimpsed at the end of our reading from Colossians. In Christ, "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him

God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things". Reconciliation to all things, dwelling together with God in the fullness of life eternal. This is the Kingdom. This is the kingship of Christ. This is what we are part of as we commit ourselves to follow our King of Kings. Amen.