

LUKE 23:33-43
JESUS THE KING

What does the word 'king' mean to you? If we did a vox pop in the street I wonder what ideas people would give us – what does the word 'king' mean to you? Here are some ideas: Elvis is called 'The King' as a reference to his place as a rock 'n' roll singer. Leonardo di Caprio's character in the film Titanic declared 'I'm the king of the world!' as he and Kate Winslet stood at the bow of the ship ploughing its way toward New York. You might have been to see *The Lion King* or watched the film on DVD, or *King Kong* or *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* the third film in Lord of Rings series, made in 2003. Or maybe the word 'king' simply reflects the story of the week, Prince William's engagement and fact that he is second in line to the throne and all things being equal will one day be king. In common with many monarchs across the world, though kingship in the UK is largely a figurehead, with little power or real authority. When we think of kings, we want to think of power and armies and thrones and splendour and wealth and servants and fame and importance and a sort of celebrity, all the trappings that go with kingship in whichever way we like to think about kings.

Today is 'Christ the King Sunday'. I'm not very good at knowing which Sundays are which during the Christian year, but I do know that today has that particular theme to it; today is the Sunday when the Church celebrates the notion that Christ is King. But if we associate kingship with power and armies and wealth and splendour and celebrity, in what sense is Jesus King? That picture of power and armies and wealth and splendour and celebrity is not one we easily and quickly associate with Jesus; He doesn't fit that kind of kingship idea and picture, but from the very beginning the Church has declared Jesus to be King and Lord, someone to be honoured and glorified and we carry that idea on today. Sometimes we lose a sense of awe and reverence for Jesus: we talk about Him as our friend and brother and of course He is these things; He is one of us, He shares our humanity; we talk about Him humbling Himself and of course that is right too. But Jesus is also King! He is worthy of glory and honour, to be treated with awe and reverence, with the greatest honour and praise.

We read part of Luke's account of the cross. At the heart of that reading is the sign that Pilate had nailed above Jesus' head as He was crucified: "*there was...*" (v38) There are all kinds of threads that need to be untangled here in what seems at first to be a simple thing. First of all, it was common Roman practice for the charge against the crucified criminal to be posted above their heads, so at first sight, Pilate is telling the world that Jesus is crucified for being King of the Jews; the Romans have killed Him because He was accused and found guilty of plotting treason against Caesar. But John's gospel shows another side to this: the Jews challenged Pilate's sign because they wanted it to read 'Jesus claimed to be...' Pilate refused to change it; does that mean that Pilate recognised something about Jesus that was different? Certainly thought Jesus an innocent man! The sign also provoked the crowd: "*if you...*" (v37) it was a reason to make fun of Jesus and His claim to be king; they teased Him, they laughed at Him.

Nothing about Jesus carried any sense of kingship. Herod was the king of the Jews and he had royal palaces, at least 2 of them, a winter palace in Jerusalem and a summer palace at Tiberias; he had servants to do his bidding, to provide for his every whim; he had soldiers; he was rich though his power had been trimmed by the Roman occupation. Jesus had none of that: He was not rich and powerful by the world's standards; He was not important, but a simple carpenter who was an itinerant preacher; He had no great army of servants or soldiers, just a small band of

disciples. He hadn't marched into the city on a great war-horse on Sunday, but had come to Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Now, He was humiliated and crucified. But...

There were two other crosses outside the city that day; two criminals were crucified with Jesus. What was it about Jesus that provoked one of them to faith? One of these criminals joins in the mockery: "*aren't you...*" (v39) but the other has a different view. "*Don't you...*" (v40f) and then to Jesus Himself he says "*Jesus, remember...*" (v.42) What was it about Jesus that provoked this remark? What was it that made the thief describe Jesus as king? We don't know, but we do know that Jesus took the man's faith and blessed him for it: "*I tell you...*" (v43) Jesus accepted the notion of king and kingship; He didn't tell the thief he was wrong, but blessed him for his declaration of faith. Jesus is the King who is also the friend of sinners, welcoming, accepting of people no matter who and what they are. He had declared and proclaimed the kingdom of God all the way through His ministry and now the thief recognised Him as King in His own right.

There is another incident earlier in the story that helps us see what kind of king Jesus is. He challenges the popular picture and notion and shows that He is different. He has just been crucified and the soldiers are throwing dice for His clothes; it was the common practice of the day. We might expect an innocent man to be angry and railing against his executioners for their injustices etc. but not Jesus. He says "*Father forgive...*" (v34) This is the man whom Pilate describes as King of the Jews; this is the man whose kingdom the thief recognises. Jesus forgives those who do Him wrong; He loves and accepts the man whose faith is hardly well-formed and who is justly crucified for crimes he has committed. This is hardly kingship material, according to the world, but this is Jesus our King.

God had promised a king like this. In the words we read at the very start of the service, through Jeremiah God promises a king who will come to the world. There are certain things about him that Jeremiah picks out: He will be descended from David; He will reign wisely; He will do what is just and right; He will be the saviour of Israel. This is the picture of the ideal king who will come and will save His people; so the title He is given is "*This is...*" (Jer 23:6b) He is the One who will save His people from their sins, the righteous King who will make His people a righteous people. This is the gospel: this is exactly what Jesus did; He came with wisdom, He did what was just and right and He became the saviour of the world, a righteous king who makes us a righteous people by His cross, by His grace, and by His love.

Somehow all of this is captured brilliantly in the opening verses of the book of Revelation: we have the bigness of Jesus – "*the faithful...*" (v.5) He is the One who is coming to the world with clouds of glory, who is to be treated with reverence and awe. The whole of the rest of Revelation takes that theme and shows the Christians that they are to have faith and confidence in bigness of Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords; He has the whole world in His hands, He has their lives, their future, their suffering in His hands. But the bigness of Jesus is centred round the fact that this King once died: "*to Him...*" (v.5b) and from this King comes grace and peace; Jesus loved the world enough to die and because He died, He brings grace and peace to troubled hearts and minds. This is Jesus the King; worthy of glory and honour; loving and caring for His people and for the world.

So what are we to say about Jesus the King?

He is a King who inspires trust Everything about Jesus inspires trust. So many people in positions of power and authority use these positions for their own ends; so we learn that they are not to be trusted; they will say anything to get people to believe them and then not keep their promise. Jesus was completely focussed on the needs

of others; what He said, He did; people everywhere recognised that He could be trusted. Even Pilate, the crusty Roman soldier, recognised the quality of Jesus the man; that's why there was perhaps more than simply the charge on that sign; perhaps there was also an element of admiration in it, that he had begun to understand that this man is what He says He is. Even people in our culture who would be critical of the Church recognise the quality of Jesus, and admire Him albeit from a distance. Jesus is a King who inspires trust, because He is a King who is focussed on our needs, a King who saves, rescues, brings grace and peace to His people, who is wise and acts justly and does what is right. That is still how Jesus is; a King whom we can trust.

He is a King to be obeyed – there is no map on which Jesus' kingdom is to be found. Jesus' kingdom is to be found in the hearts and minds of His people, in our hearts and minds. Our responsibility is to give Jesus His proper place, as the One to whom we listen and the One who has authority over us. He says *"Love God, love your neighbour"* This is not simply good advice; these are commands. Jesus commands us and we must obey. He is the King and head of the Church: so Jesus is the One who has authority over His Church and the Church has really no freedom to set aside Jesus' teaching and go our own way. Jesus is King and so we should obey Him, keep his Word, and live according to His word.

He is a King to be copied – What qualities do we admire in Jesus? Even in Luke 23 there are two: Jesus forgives, Jesus loves; He forgives those who hurt Him and He loves the penitent thief. These are just two of the many qualities that we admire in Jesus. The challenge that Jesus' kingship poses for us – that we learn to be like Him! Forgiving, patient, compassionate, loving, just, One who does right, faithful, honest – these are all qualities we see in Jesus. We have role models, people we want to be like; posters on the bedroom wall, or magazine pictures and we want to be like the picture of the supermodel, or be the famous footballer like our hero! For the Christian, the one role model above all rest is Jesus. We need to learn to be like Him. There are ways in which never be like Jesus: He alone is King, He alone is able to do miracles, He alone is the Saviour of the world. But there are all kinds of other ways in which can learn to be like Him and His qualities be our qualities, His ways our ways. He is a King to be imitated.

This is the Sunday for honouring Christ the King! Rejoice that Jesus is King, full of glory and majesty and splendour; rejoice in the bigness of Jesus as King of heaven and earth, king of the Church, king of our lives. He is a King who once was crucified and wore a crown of thorns; a king who loved us enough to lay down His life; a King who forgave His persecutors, a King who loved the penitent thief; a King who came to be the saviour of the world. So He is a King who inspires trust – we learn to trust Him as Saviour and Lord of our lives; a king who is to be obeyed – we learn to do as He says; a king who is to be copied – as He loves, so are we to love. We honour the king by our worship; we honour Him by renewing our faith and trust; we honour Him by our obedience; we honour Him by imitating Him. This is the Sunday for honouring Christ the King, but this is for more than a Sunday; this is for life!