

CHRIST THE KING 2018

The Feast of Christ the King is a relatively new Sunday for churches to observe. It was only introduced less than 100 years ago, in 1925, by the then Pope, Pius XI, because he felt that belief in Jesus, and therefore in his eyes, the Church, was waning in the years after the 1st World War. So he introduced the concept of Christ the King – to whom all should return in universal obedience and loyalty, and so also return to the church.

It didn't really work. And in many ways the concept of a universal king doesn't really sit very well today, where the trend is very much away from big power blocs and authorities – think Brexit from the EU, independence for Catalonia, and the fragmentation of politics in Germany. Is not the notion of Christ the King of the World a bit outmoded? Would it not be better to return to the old description of the Sunday next before Advent as Stir-Up Sunday?

Stir-up Sunday got its name from the beginning of the collect for the day in the Book of Common Prayer, which begins with the words, "Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people". But it became associated with the custom of making the Christmas puddings on that day. The idea that families would traditionally gather to stir and steam the Christmas pudding in anticipation of the big day. Pre M&S days!

In some ways, Yes. The description of Jesus as king seems inappropriate for didn't he reject political power during his temptations in the wilderness at the start of his ministry? He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey as a symbol of humility and not the powerful King the people expected on a horse.

Yet, as one commentator has remarked, the life of Jesus was book-ended by kingship.

As a young child he was visited by what have been called "three kings", and didn't his family have to flee to Egypt from the wrath of the evil King Herod? And at the end of his ministry he hung on a cross to which Pilate had affixed the title "King of the Jews".

But as with many accepted ideas Jesus turned the concept of kingship on its head.

A few years ago I was part of a work team that visited Swaziland which borders South Africa. We went there to do the kind of things we hope to do in Uganda. Swaziland is the last and only country in Africa today to have a king. And as we heard when we went there, the king has total sway and control, especially as he appoints the majority of the parliament!

The king lived in luxury while his subjects lived in poverty. He creamed off a large proportion of any donations and investments that were made to help Swaziland.

To get anything done you needed to work the system and grease the palms of his relatives who were government ministers. It was bad old-fashioned dictatorship dressed up as democracy. It is far from the kind of nominal and ceremonial ideas of monarchy that we have today.

But it doesn't fit with the kingship of Jesus. It is not a description that Jesus used. In fact the only time he acknowledged that he was a king was in front of Pilate when during his trial before the Roman Governor he said, "My kingdom is not of this world." So what are we to understand about the Kingship of Christ which we celebrate today?

In today's Gospel, a very clear light is shone on the kind of kingdom that Jesus would like to see established in his name. It is above all a kingdom of service. As someone once said, commenting on how Jesus washed the feet of the disciples at the Last Supper, "True followers of Christ should not be standing on their dignity, but rather be kneeling in service at the feet of those in need."

Today's Gospel is all about service, seeing Christ, serving Christ, in the most unlikely people and places.

How often have we crossed the road to avoid a beggar with his cardboard begging box, or the charity collector shaking their tin?

How often do we avert our eyes when the seller of The Big Issue offers a cheery 'Hello'? Or we keep looking intently ahead when, for example, near Liverpool Central, we come across those sleeping rough in various doorways?

I came across a modern version of today's Gospel, part of which goes like this:-

"I was hungry, not for food, but for a smile, and all I got was sour looks. I was hungry for a word of encouragement but all you did was criticise me. I was thirsty for a sign of friendship but you ignored me. I was a stranger but you refused to have anything to do with me. I was sick, not in body, but with doubt and worry, and you never even noticed. I was a prisoner of loneliness, and you gave me the cold shoulder. I was homeless for want of sympathy and understanding, and you treated me as if I were a block of wood.

Then the king will say to those on his right hand:

Come, you that have been blessed by my father. For I was hungry for a smile, and you gave it to me. I was hungry for a word of encouragement, and you praised me, for a word of appreciation, and you thanked me. I was wounded by failure and disappointment, and by your supportive attitude you healed me. I was in the pit of depression and by your patient attitude you gave me hope..."

We are not asked to do the impossible. Just to make a shift in our priorities and attitudes.

We serve Christ the King when we serve the poorest and the most vulnerable. As Mother Teresa once said, “The worst disease in the world today is the feeling of being unwanted, and the greatest evil is lack of love. What the poor need even more than food, clothes and shelter, is to be wanted.”

We shine a light for Christ the King when we minister, in whatever way, to the least of his brothers and sisters.

A few weeks ago I came across this saying by the French philosopher Simone Weil (Vale) –
“If I light an electric torch, I don’t judge its power by looking at the bulb but by seeing how many objects it lights up.”

As we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King, let us remember today’s Gospel and those words of Jesus,

‘Just as you did it or did not do it, for one of the least of these who members of my family, you did it, or did not do it, for me.’

Christ’s kingdom is not about power, pomp and ceremony, but at heart about service, sacrifice and love. Concepts which when put into practice still can move people’s hearts and changes lives.

So maybe that is a better focus than a Sunday that had become associated with Christmas pudding!