

Sermon on Sunday 24 November 2024

by Rev. Bill Church

CHRIST THE KING - Preached at Sawbridgeworth

Some years ago, I went up to London and, as I was walking away from Victoria Station, lo and behold, from the gate at the back of Buckingham Palace came out a posse of mounted police. This was followed by four (or was it five?) state coaches, all gilt and scarlet, drawn by fine horses, with coachmen and postillions in extravagant gold and scarlet uniforms.

And I could hear a military band in the Mall.

The Queen and her entourage were going to Westminster for the State Opening of Parliament.

It was all very well ordered, great fun and the tourists loved it.

But, if you asked me, 'Is this how you imagine Christ the King?' ... Well, I would just have laughed. And the question is laughable.

King Jesus would have found a more humble, and maybe a more modern and efficient, way of getting to Westminster; and, when he got there, he would certainly not have allowed anybody else to write his speech for him.

Which leads me to conclude that there are many traps for us when we talk of “Christ the King”.

A trap for us, for congregations steeped in this nation’s history and culture, is to see Christ, and God, as just a constitutional monarch having a good deal of respect and affection, lots of pomp and circumstance; some influence but hardly any real power.

A comfortable God to live with, but is that a true picture of God? That is certainly not the God of the Bible and the Creeds.

Another trap would be to see Christ, and God, in the guise of how real Kings used to be, vested with personal and unaccountable power, which they used more or less as they thought fit, handing out favours and punishments without explanation or appeal and attacking neighbouring kingdoms if they thought they could get some advantage from that; exercising a rule not of respect and justice but of fear and reward. A sort of celestial Putin, but even worse because he would control the next world as well as this.

That kind of God might enforce good behaviour and it might be handy to think you had that kind of God on your side. But is that true picture of God either? That is certainly not the God of the New Testament.

And another trap is to transfer the Kingship of Jesus to the fallible human beings who carry forward his word and the human structures built to protect and contain the church.

There is great wisdom in the church and in those who seek to ground it on the authority of scripture, reason and tradition; and maybe too much pride in those who think they always know better.

The feast of Christ the King was invented in Italy in 1925 and was a useful reminder that Christ, not Mussolini, should be venerated. But Kingship resides in Christ, not any of the fallible institutions which try to represent him on earth.

Christians have always sought to emphasise the supremacy of God, necessarily using whatever language has been available, often of kings, but at the same time pointing to differences between God and the kind of kings they actually met.

Jesus' teaching is full of "the kingdom of heaven is like...", but it is never like Herod or Israel's Old Testament kings, let alone modern autocracies.

The BCP gospel a few Sundays ago was the story which ends, "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's; and to God that which is God's". Some knowledge of the constitution of the Roman Empire might allow you to list that which was Caesar's; but who could ever list what is God's, short of putting down "everything"?

Early Christians had a statement of faith, almost a creed, "Jesus is Lord"; Lord not just in the sense of being an embodiment of the Lord of the Old Testament, but also in

the sense of being an alternative to, not a copy of, the Caesar in Rome.

In our services and in our daily prayers, we say “Our Father... your kingdom come... yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory...” How should we go to meet that kingdom on its way?

Not, I hope, with the fear due to a tyrant, nor with the polite disregard we might offer a constitutional monarch, but with obedience – a thinking response, a response of reason, trying to understand what God wants of us and doing it. And adoration – a feeling response, a response of the soul, trying to grasp what God is and how to worship God.

That would be far more than any king could command, far more than we would offer any king.