

The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer
The Solemnity of Christ the King, year 'B'
22 November, 2009
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All of the elements of this service – the glorious music, the splendid robes, the impressive ceremonial – seem to confirm our ideals of royalty, of kingship, as a dignified, edifying and majestic institution. Yet you and I increasingly feel that these ideals are out of step with contemporary life. Our thirst for scandal and gossip – a thirst slaked by muck-raking journalists – has put paid to any notions we had of royalty as being somehow different and better; we cannot escape the truth that beneath the pomp and power, the anointing and the acclamations, the robes and razzmatazz, they are no different from the rest of us. It is increasingly difficult to see royals as examples of high-minded, virtuous rectitude.

This is a world which John the Divine would have recognized. In his *Revelation*, he calls the risen Jesus 'King' and 'King of Kings': the letter is saturated with images of royal power, and in it the figure of the exalted Christ is ablaze with light, surrounded by baffling and frightening symbols of power and authority – two-edged swords, trumpets, crowns, golden robes, lampstands. But John and his first readers were no admirers of monarchy, and in ascribing royalty to Jesus he was being quite consciously subversive: John was attacking, not exalting, earthly rule and earthly rulers.

He wrote his letter sometime in the last decades of the first century when the Emperor Domitian was actively and savagely persecuting the Christians. The Emperor himself claimed to be King of Kings; he styled himself *Kurios* (which means Lord); he appeared on his coinage holding seven stars in his hand. Thus John, in ascribing these titles and attributes to Jesus, is subverting the earthly power of the emperor and his empire who are portrayed (in code, of course) not as the legitimate rulers ordained by God and thus to be obeyed, but as the enemies of God: the Whore of Babylon, the Great Beast, the Antichrist.

So to call Christ 'King' was to reject the claims of Domitian as blasphemous and idolatrous. *The Revelation to St. John* is sometimes called *The Apocalypse*, the meaning of which, as I reminded you last week, isn't some immanent cataclysm, but an 'unveiling' or 'revelation.' Just as the curtain is pulled back from the all-powerful Oz, revealing him to be insubstantial and powerless, John shows his first readers – he shows us – what lies beneath and behind the claims the rulers of this age make and their true nature, how they are unreal and corrupt. He shows us what lies at the heart of things, which is the vision of Christ the true King. And the vision which eventually emerges at the close of the book is not one of the conquering emperor but of the slaughtered Lamb; it is not power which sits enthroned at the heart of the

universe but meekness, which is embodied by the suffering and sacrificial death of Jesus.

This vision is shared by another John – the evangelist – who sets before us that powerful scene in which Pontius Pilate, the representative of the world’s greatest power, the Roman Empire, is exposed as a feckless and cowardly fraud by nothing more – nothing less – than the majestic humility of one he derides as ‘King of the Jews.’ In passing judgement on Jesus, Pilate passes judgement on himself and the powers he represents; in having Jesus nailed to the cross, Pilate enthrones him. Jesus’ death is the ultimate unveiling, if you will, in which we see truly and fully how things really are.

Which brings me to the present moment. It is tempting and too easy to get lost in the outward splendour of this morning’s worship. Most of us want to revel in this fantastic music and absorb the beauty of these surroundings. And this is natural. But we must see past the glitter and look beneath the surface – behind the curtain, if you will – to find the true meaning of this service. For just as we have seen behind the curtain of man-made monarchy and known that it is a flimsy concept, we see that behind the gore of the cross there is glory, and in this defeat there is victory. We see that the only power is the power of love, humility, and service. We see that Jesus’ kingdom is based not on coercion and competition but on companionship and compassion. We see that on his strange and horrifying throne, Christ has endured all that we can do to one another in hate and has emerged utterly without hate, even towards those – us – who have hated him.

And perhaps what we see most clearly is that to accept his rule is to enter into the perfect freedom of love, to align ourselves not with the powerful but with the powerless, to seek to make all of the institutions of our society and community instruments of compassion, not instruments of domination. Earthly thrones are built on fear and the power to over-awe; distance is part of their meaning. Kings and Queens have subjects. But Christ the King has no subjects, only brothers and sisters, loved, free, and summoned to put aside all fear – fear of life, fear of death, fear of one another. And Christ the King is not remote but is enthroned on your heart and on mine for evermore.