

# Sermon for King's College Chapel, 20 November 2011

## Christ the King

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Today, the last Sunday in the liturgical year, we celebrate the feast of Christ the King. You'd not have been able to say that 100 years ago, since this particular feast was only inaugurated in 1925 by Pope Pius XI, as a reaction to the rise of secularism throughout the world. It was hoped that by establishing a feast day of such solemnity, people would understand that the Church has a right to freedom and that Christ must reign in our hearts and minds, our wills and our bodies.

Some hope! The influence and authority of the Church has been consistently eroded over the decades, and the truth is that for most people it is nothing more than a quaint anachronism, at best well-meaning, and at worst meddling, ineffectual and at times downright dangerous.

Christ the King. What is our contemporary understanding of kingship? Autocracy? Pageantry? We've had little in the way of autocratic behaviour from the inhabitants of Buckingham Palace for a good while. But we did have a terrific display of pageantry earlier this year, when our collective national bosom heaved with pride at the massively hyped royal wedding. Some of us left the country. But what was it specifically that aroused our interest, or even our indifference? It certainly had nothing to do with our feeling threatened. Was it, perhaps, the unattainability of it all; the fact that our own personal invitations had inexplicably been lost in the post? Are we envious of this state of royalty/prospective kingship? Perhaps it is because we do pageantry spectacularly well in this country, and the fact that our monarchy, although extravagantly costly, is not inclined towards acts of manic despotism.

The Princess Victoria was reported as having exclaimed on hearing in 1837 that she was about to become Queen, 'Oh, I will be good!' Though some cynic has suggested that she was misheard, and what she actually said was, 'Oh, I will be? Good!'

What does kingship entail? Wealth? Power? Leanings towards despotism? Responsibility? Perhaps all of the above. But then where does that lead? Does calling Christ 'King' of itself smack of oppression and antiquity? Apart from the fact that, as

someone has written, 'Christ the King' has a much better ring to it than 'Christ our Democratically Elected Leader', it should not be so. For without doubt, 'kingship' involves responsibility; care, not just for affairs of state, but care for the individual, care for those in distress, care for peace and justice. As described by Matthew, none of the actions and reactions demanded by this King of his subjects in terms of personal connections and commitment relates in any way to the grandiose and the opulent. Rather the opposite.

In Matthew's Gospel, Christ the King displays many of the attributes of Christ the peasant. He was born in unimaginably downmarket conditions, his early life was humble and his trade was the trade of an artisan. He himself suggests to John's disciples that if they're looking for someone smart, regal, someone dressed in soft raiment, they're looking in the wrong place. They should be focussing their search in a King's palace. His is not that sort of sovereignty, and this, clearly, is no ordinary king. This is a king who says that he was hungry, he was thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned (falsely, presumably); Here is no sense of military might, of social or economic opulence. Here is a king presenting himself, paradoxically, as someone in the greatest need, looking for succour from the poorest of his subjects. What do they/we do? How do they/we react? By feeding, nourishing him, caring for him, even just assuring him that he's not alone, the needs of the king are at least to some extent, answered. And the important point is that nothing impossible is demanded of the subjects, of you and me. No one is being asked to explain the mysteries of the cosmos, or to save the planet. God is to be found in the individual who shuffles up to you and me in the street and asks for change, for the individual playing her pipes outside Sainsbury's, for the individual supported by Amnesty International, and on and on.

In responding to the needs of such people, we are responding to the call of God to care for our fellow human beings. And I know that sounds obvious, but I recognise that I am shaken by the number of times when I fail to respond in any adequate way. I know that there are times when I mean to donate to a collection, but never somehow get round to it, when I mean to write to a friend in trouble of some sort, and never somehow get round to it. I know full well that there are times when I purposely cross the road when I see someone coming who might ask for a handout, and then feeling wormlike for my lack of generosity, but probably not for long enough. I remember, years ago, being approached by a rather crumpled Frenchman on the path between Westminster Abbey and St Margaret's church next door, and being asked for a hand-out. No escape, so I fished the change out of my pocket.

There wasn't much of it, and the Frenchman looked shocked at my evident lack of wealth, and, rummaging around in his own pockets, produced a great deal more change than I had, and started to hand coins over to me. He had, as the Irish put it, drink taken, but I know that his automatic reaction was a good deal more Christian than mine.

The life of Christ is, as it were, book-ended by kingship. It is the Magi, who seeking him at his birth, ask directions for the new-born King of the Jews, much to the dismay and anxiety of Herod, another king, whose own style of kingship could not have been more different. And at the end of his life, Christ had a notice hammered onto the top of his cross – 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.' This is a king who begins his earthly life in a stable and ends it as the victim of a cruel public execution.

His own reaction to the question as to whether he was a king, is, at least to Pilate, maddeningly elusive. 'Are you, or are you not, a king?' demands Pilate in John's Gospel. The answer won't have reassured him. 'My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, then I'd have a whole crowd of people fighting for me, but it isn't. My kingly role is to bear witness to the truth.'

In the words of Francis Warner, who wrote a text that we will hear sung in an anthem this evening,

'He turns our royal pageants upside-down,  
Subverts earth's power structures into dust.'

Mark, too, emphasises the importance of this kingly role. It is not, he stresses, to exercise lordship over people, but, on the contrary, to minister to them, to be their servant. We will hear in readings from Isaiah leading up to Christmas of the role of the servant. The twin threads of kingship and servant, of authority and servitude, which need not, of course, of itself be servile, are so closely intertwined that they become one yarn with which the fabric of Christ's ministry is woven. Christ the King is also Christ the Shepherd, and is descended from David the King, who was also David the Shepherd. The Archangel Gabriel is uncompromising about his status in his message, 'The Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.' The paradox is the contrast between the two roles, shepherd and king.

This is the king who invites us to attend his great feast as guests, as we were reminded the other week by Professor Coakley; the king who makes no discrimination, but whose invitations are extended to all, of both high and low estate. It is up to us, as we approach this season of Advent, to work out how, or indeed, whether we will respond.