

## The Feast of Christ the King

**Readings:** Ezekiel 34:11-24; Psalm 95:1-7; Matthew 25:31-46

The universal King, seated on his throne of glory. The nations of the world assembled below him for judgment, like flocks of sheep... Is *that* what's going to happen? How seriously can you take this story? How convincing is this image of Christ the King?

The problem is, kings ain't what they used to be! Few kings are left in the world today. Most nations that had them got rid of them in revolutions. One or two absolute monarchs carry on in the Middle East. But here in northern Europe the monarchs that survive are largely decorative, shorn of real executive power.

So 'kingship' is becoming a dead metaphor. Which raises problems for our talk of God. For this language of royalty, and the praising of God as King, permeate our scriptures and our worship. ('Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe ...' is the opening of numerous Jewish prayers.) The King of Israel, King of the Universe, exercises absolute dominion and demands absolute obedience. He leads his armies; he judges the nations.

Though it's not just about power, for the divine king is praised also as source of justice and of nurture – as in that lovely picture of the shepherd-king we heard from the prophet Ezekiel. 'I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak ... I will feed them with justice.'

Can we rejuvenate, can we 'democratise' that picture of divine kingship for a world where kings are defunct or just decorative?

I'm wary about this – and wary, to be honest, about this whole feast of Christ the King. Wary, partly because the kingship of God and of Christ have been used over the centuries to underwrite tyranny and oppression by human rulers.

Think of those crusaders, sailing east to slaughter and to conquer in the name of Christ the King. Or of the later 'Christian' empires of Europe, extending their sway with their mixture of war and looting and baptising. Or think of today's jihadist, celebrating murder with the cry 'God is great!' Or again of those millions of American evangelical Trump-supporters, shouting their slogan 'Pro-life, pro-God, pro-guns!'

It's all a far cry from Ezekiel's vision of the compassionate shepherd-king and the benign ruler David, anointed by God to lead his people.

The actual history of David and his successors as Israelite kings was largely a sad mixture of corruption, idolatry and political failure. But the yearning didn't expire for a *messiah*, that is, an anointed king: a new David, to rule in God's name, to bring freedom to his people and justice to the afflicted world.

And when this Son of David comes, proclaiming the kingdom of God, he is largely unrecognised, and any claims to kingship mocked. For, surely, this Galilean peasant is no king! He leads no armies and bears no arms. His diplomatic corps is a rabble of fishermen and tax-collectors. He argues with the clergy (a very reprehensible thing!)

and challenges the wealthy (even more unwise!). He spurns the rules of purity and of respectability.

Yet Jesus *does* wear a crown. It's made of thorns, and thrust on his head near his place of execution – where the mocking placard reads 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'.

So the king dies. The king dies ... and with him must die all our royal fantasies, whether of coercion on the one hand or of deference on the other. With him must die all those dangerous cravings in our own century for a strong man, a dictator-messiah to lead us.

No: Jesus dies, and Jesus lives, as *Christ the anti-king*; the slain lamb, who destabilises all human kingdoms and systems – which is why Pontius Pilate is so unnerved by his interrogation of his prisoner Jesus: the imperial ruler cannot grasp this disruptive kingship.

For yes, Jesus is indeed *the Judge*; the Judge before whose utter faithfulness and courage all the contrivances of our consciences and our churches and our politics are laid bare. And this is in fact a more rigorous judgment than that of mere power or law – which you can evade just by keeping your head down and sticking to the rules.

Look again at that gospel picture. (It's the last words of Jesus in Matthew's story before the Passover and the last supper.) The king doesn't ask 'Have you bowed down before my throne?' or 'Have you obeyed every one of my laws?' Rather, 'Have you met me and fed me and accompanied me in your afflicted neighbour and your afflicted world? For *that* is where I live, and suffer, and rejoice; here in your midst, not on some exalted throne.'

So for our afflicted world, in all its present confusion and need, and in the name of Christ the King who breathes in us and in our neighbours, let us now pray ...