

**Sermon for Christ the King by The Reverend Colin James at All Saints Church
Wokingham 26 November 2017**

The gospel reading was Matthew 25.31-end

The story's told of a former Dean of Windsor who used to say, "If there's one thing the Queen and I can't stand, it's name-dropping." The temptation to seek a bit of reflected glory by claiming some connection with a famous or powerful person is pretty strong in most of us. And if, like us, one lives in a monarchy, who fits the bill better than the king or queen? One of the nuns at Wantage was being questioned by a doctor to establish her mental state. "Can you tell me, Sister, the name of the sovereign?" he asked. She replied without hesitation, "Why! The King of kings, and Lord of lords, of course."

Today we're thinking about Jesus Christ as king. And it's obvious from the start that the pictures we usually have of a king hardly fit him at all. Although the notice pinned to his cross says, "King of the Jews", what sort of king wears a crown made of thorns? Or in place of a sceptre carries a reed? If Jesus is truly a king, we have to rethink completely what that word means.

First, we remember that Jesus' words and actions during his life on earth were aimed at proclaiming the Kingdom of God. They suggested either that it was on its way, or even that it was here already, if only you knew how to look for it. It wasn't to be a kingdom won by military conquest. Nor one in which the ruler lorded it over his subjects, as the Gentiles did. It's to be the rule of none other than the God who is love itself. Its ways are to be of gentleness and all its paths of peace.

Admittedly the use of the word "king" in the gospels is not always consistent and can be confusing. Sometimes it seems to refer to the Father, but sometimes to Jesus himself. Take today's gospel. Here at least it's clear that the king is Jesus. He starts by speaking of the Son of Man, a title he often used of himself. But by the third sentence this Son of Man has become "the king", not surprising since he's pictured himself as "sitting on the throne of his glory." And we're left in no doubt that this is still Jesus speaking because he talks of those who are "blessed by my Father."

This passage only appears in Matthew's gospel and comes as the culmination of a long discourse "in which Jesus has denounced the people and their leaders for their failure to live as God's people should." (T Wright Matthew p 142) He's been warning everybody to be ready for judgment to come at an unexpected time. And today's reading is followed directly by the preparations for Jesus' death. So we're at a moment of crisis and judgment. The idea that there'd be a time when men and women would stand before God and be judged on their deeds was familiar. A number of Jesus' sayings warn that this will come when it's least expected, "like a thief in the night". But the trouble with thinking of judgment as just something for the future is that we're tempted to keep putting off taking it seriously, the very thing Jesus is warning against. The parable he tells challenges our complacency that there'll be plenty of time to start thinking about judgment when the moment actually arrives.

It tells us that judgment has in fact been going on throughout our lives. And we didn't even realise it. One of the striking features of the king's verdict is that it appears to come as surprise to everyone who hears it. For the first group, on the king's right, it's a good surprise. When they hear themselves commended for their loving concern for the king himself they're genuinely puzzled. They say in effect, "What me? Surely you've got that wrong!" No doubt they think that this the very first time they've looked on the king. So how can they possibly have ministered to his needs? In any case what needs does the king, now seated on his throne in glory, have that they might have been able to meet?

As the assembled company hears his reply, "Just as you did it to one of the least of one these members of my family, you did it to me," a shudder will have gone down the backs of those standing on the left. Their question doesn't express puzzlement. It's an attempt to justify themselves. They've heard the king's answer, so they already know what he's going to say to them. The verdict on them is clear. It only remains for sentence to be passed. For the first group the sentence is eternal life, for the others punishment, exclusion from God's presence. In other words it's a matter of life or death. I imagine the second group felt most unjustly treated. What sort of king, or God, plays tricks on his subjects by coming among them in disguise and then judges them on whether they can see through the disguise? But that's a completely wrong way of presenting the situation.

When God, in the life of Jesus, chooses to see what it's really like to live as a human, there's absolutely nothing to be learned by becoming one cocooned in power and privilege. And what's more his heart of compassion simply won't let him pass by the poor and suffering of this world like the priest and Levite in the story of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10.31-32). St Paul understood this when he wrote of Jesus, "he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." (Phil 2.7) Indeed nothing else would do.

This goes to the very heart of the king's judgment. In distinguishing between those who've acted with compassion for others and those who've lived for themselves, he's made the distinction between the Christlike and the rest. Of course God, "who knows the secrets of our hearts" understands our feelings of helplessness faced with the mountain of suffering and need wherever we look across the world. He knows that he only can lift that crushing burden. And yet he looks to us his children to join in the task.

Not everyone notices that the parable we read today begins by telling us that it is "all the nations", not only individuals, who appear before the king's judgment throne. Since we have the good fortune to live in a democracy, that must place on us a duty to ensure that our country behaves in a compassionate and generous way to the poor of God's world. By deciding to leave the European Union we're severely limiting our ability to help the least fortunate on our own continent. God forbid that we should go on to cut back on the aid we offer elsewhere to the poorest in the world. If some of that aid is being mis-directed, that's a wrong we must put right. But not at the expense of those in need. It shouldn't need saying, but as Christians we're committed to living as far as we are able in a Christlike way. The king we're pledged to follow commands our loyalty by virtue of his service, suffering and sacrifice. In him we have a king who's positively happy for us to name drop his name, "that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow".

Colin James