

Christ the King

Welcome to our online reflections on this last Sunday before Advent, known as Christ the King.

I'm the Reverend Carla Vicencio Prior, Team Vicar of the Wirksworth Team Ministry, and whether you are a regular to these reflections or you are with us for the first time, you are very welcome.

We begin with the collect—the opening prayer for this Sunday, followed by a reflection and a time of prayer. The lectionary reading for today is John 18:33-37, Pilate's questioning of Jesus. You may want to take your time to read this in advance of listening to the reflection.

Let us pray

Collect

Eternal Father,
whose Son Jesus Christ
ascended to the throne of heaven
that he might rule over all things as Lord and King:
keep the Church in the unity of the Spirit and in the
bond of peace,
and bring the whole created order to worship at his feet;
who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy
Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

John 18:33-37

33 Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' 34 Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' 35 Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' 36 Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' 37 Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.'

Reflection

Christ the criminal

Christ the King, love it or loath it, it's the festival which closes our liturgical year. The year that begins in Advent with the hope of the coming Messiah ends with the proclamation of his universal sovereignty.

But that got me thinking about the choice of the passage for today. The reading chosen, was not one of the ascended Jesus, enthroned in glory at the Father's right hand, but one of the incarnated Jesus, being tried in court. Not so much Christ the King, more Christ the criminal. Interesting choice, don't you think?

Let's imagine the scene...

The dialog between Pilate and Jesus takes place during a trial proceeding. At this point, if we were to use modern terms, Jesus has already been arrested by the "police", experienced "police" brutality, and gone through the first part of a sham trial. This hearing before Pilate is another example of Jesus being set up to cast him as a criminal for resisting the Roman Empire. That's the story so far.

The Roman Empire didn't get to be as powerful and as widespread as it was without imposing its system of Pax Romana – Roman peace.

The reality of this "peace" was often brutal oppression designed to keep the status quo in place, and the poor downtrodden and pacified. All manner of methods were used to repress those who resisted its power. Jesus is caught up in this.

This model of leadership hasn't unfortunately disappeared in our day and age either. A week ago, at COP26, some powerful nations decided to keep protecting their interests at the expense of smaller nations. This week, some powerful men in Belarus have hit the headlines as they are using human beings as pawns in a war of attrition against the EU...

In our newspapers and across the world there is a continued discourse of oppression that has, quite successfully, created a “criminal” underclass of

- Black people,
- Of refugees,
- of those of other faiths,

all of whom suffer discrimination, through unequally applied laws and unequal opportunities. This is successfully done with rhetoric that makes “poor” synonymous with “scrounger”, or “refugee” synonymous with “problem”. This helps to maintain the status quo, the powerful remain in power but at the expense of vulnerable people living in constant fear of persecution and enduring unbearable hardship and exclusion.

The gospel reading shows Jesus suffering with the oppressed, and it is easy for us to sympathise and align ourselves with Jesus. And I hope that that gives us the opportunity to think about the people our current Empires are criminalising – and crucifying – today...

...and while we’re at it – who are our current Empires? And the obvious answer is: **we are**...

Because of course, the crunch is that **I** am part of this white elite, our current Empire. I’m part of it by the colour of my skin, my education and sometimes even my job. And at what point did I lose track of that? Or even more scarily – what if I was never aware of this at all, in my Christian journey? In that gospel story I am more Pilate than Jesus...

My kingdom is not of this world...

Of course it isn't the colour of my skin or my education that is the problem, per se. It's the privilege they convey. It is so ingrained in society that often we don't see it, or the harm it causes others. When we are born part of an elite group we have to be aware,... and listening... and questioning. We have the responsibility for what we do with the privileges we were given. And this is where Jesus' words come into play.

Jesus Kingdom

Jesus says: "My kingdom is not of this world"...

Many have interpreted this to mean that Jesus' kingdom is somewhere in heaven and not relevant to this world. To me, Jesus is saying that the values of his kingdom are different from those of the current system. In other words, Jesus does not have to exercise the type of authority that seeks to be on top, which results in oppression, corruption of the judicial system, and precisely the kind of hypocrisy that Pilate exhibited in the interaction between him and Jesus.

Jesus tells him: "If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

The values of Jesus' kingdom are so vastly different from those of this world that often we Christians fail to understand them. The church, which purports to—and should—represent Jesus' kingdom, is here to serve in humility rather than to seek earthly power. Jesus is the king, yet he does not arrive in a chariot, but on a

donkey! Jesus is a king who is killed by those with societal power, not a king who is victorious over his enemies by defeating them in war.

So as a white, educated, powerful Christian, it is important that I keep in the forefront of my mind that the God I follow – Jesus – was a man of colour sentenced to a criminal's death by the Roman Empire for defying the status quo.

Jesus rebels – to death! – against everything that has put me and keeps me where I am today. He did it to show us the way to Life. His death is the ultimate demonstration of the power of love.

Let us take this opportunity to remind ourselves that we serve a king like no other—a king who is not seeking power and glory, but humble service to others. So, we who identify as the Church should seek to engage in humble service to others.

Christ the King Sunday offers an opportunity for us, as the church here in Wirksworth, to re-assess our values. This Sunday gives you an opportunity to rethink your commitment and your goal as part of this church. To become ever more aware of our privilege and to use it for the good of the oppressed - use it for rebellion, as Jesus did. We must be a church that serves, not a church that conquers. Because Jesus' Kingdom chooses relationship. Jesus' Kingdom chooses solidarity and justice, for the marginalised, for those who are not like us. We must make small and sometimes large choices that give voice to the voiceless, in the use of our economic, or environmental power!

Let us pray that the Holy Spirit might point us in the direction Jesus intends for us, so that we may truly be the real church that our world so desperately needs.

Amen

Prayer

God the Father, help us to hear the call of Christ the King and to follow in his service, whose Kingdom has no end; for he reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, one glory. Amen

Blessing

May the Lord bless us and guide us,
may he open our eyes to his immeasurable love and his omnipresence in our world and in our lives.
And the blessing of God almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit
be with you and those you love, today and always.
Amen.