

Christ the King (CC sermon: Luke 23:33-43)

If you get your hands on one of these in two weeks' time— you might have a rare collector's item. Because from December, the new 50p coin will have the face of King Charles III. *And*, if you *do* get your hands on one in December, perhaps hold on to it because they will be the only coins in history with Charles' face and a 2022 date on them! However, before you all start dreaming of an early retirement, it's worth knowing that they're making 9.6million of these...

Charles' face will be very soon ever-present. He will be on all our currency, by May we'll have celebrated the pomp and ceremony of his coronation, and after the World Cup (depending how far England get), we'll be used to singing God Save our King, rather than the current version, which often ends up something like "God Save our Quing..." All of this means, we cannot fail to recognise that Charles is indeed King.

Today, the church celebrates that Christ is King. Though we are also reminded that his Kingship, is not what we might expect. As Luke's Gospel reads, Jesus is crucified on the cross, mocked as "king of the Jews," wearing a crown, not of jewels, but of thorns.

Of course, it can be very hard to trust that Jesus truly is a king. It was hard for his disciples to trust this. They scattered anxiously, bemused and heartbroken, as they saw their supposed Messiah arrested, tortured and put to death. How can Jesus truly be the King of kings if this is how the story ends, they wonder?

Similarly, for us today, it might be hard to trust that Jesus is truly King of Kings, when we look at the world around us. Does Jesus Christ truly have authority? If so, why isn't he doing anything about war, injustice, poverty, the loss of loved ones. Our list could go on... We find ourselves mocking among the crowds: "if you really are the King save yourself," or, with the first thief, "if you really are the King, save us!"

Reflecting on the incognito or hiddenness of Christ's kingship, Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, told this story:

Suppose, if you would.. there was a king who loved a humble maiden. He really was a King, and she really was a humble maiden.

This king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power. No one dared breathe a word against him, for he had the strength to crush all opponents. And yet this mighty king was melted by love for this humble maiden who lived in a poor village in his kingdom. How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his kingliness tied his hands. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels and clothed her body in royal robes, she would surely not resist— *no one* dared resist him. But would she love him?

She would say she loved him, of course, but would she truly? Or would she live with him in fear, nursing a private grief for the life she had left behind? Would she be happy at his side? How could he know for sure? If he rode to her forest cottage in his royal carriage, with an armed escort waving bright banners, that too would overwhelm her. He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted a lover, an equal. He wanted her to forget that he was a king and she a humble maiden and to let shared

love cross the gulf between them. For it is only in love that the unequal can be made equal.

The king, convinced he could not elevate the maiden without crushing her freedom, resolved to descend to her. Clothed as a beggar, he approached her cottage with a worn cloak fluttering loose about him. This was not just a disguise – the king took on a totally new identity – He had renounced his throne to declare his love and to win hers.

In Jesus Christ, God comes among us in human form to declare his love for us. In Jesus, God invite us into relationship with him, to share in the riches of his kingdom. As the Colossians reading puts it: “He has enabled us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light, rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of his Beloved Son.”

Or, in that beautiful exchange between Jesus and the thief who prays; “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”, we hear the assurance of invitation to dwell and share in his kingdom: “This day, you will be with me in paradise.”

So, how will *we* respond to this king? The King of Kings. Do we see his true glory? Even in the darkness of the cross? Might we instead respond like the second thief, seeing in Jesus’ powerlessness and weakness a power and authority that transcends all power, all kingdoms? A kingdom that can never be defeated, because it is built on a love that never ends.

At the cross, we see a kingdom that transcends the power and kingdoms of this world. At the cross, we see a King who is so free, that he can submit himself to being nailed and captive on a cross. At the cross, we see true Kingship, in the form of a servant king.

I will finish with the words of this poem:¹

When I look at the blood
all I see is love, love, love.
When I stop at the cross
I can see the love of God.

But I can’t see competition.
I can’t see hierarchy.
I can’t see pride or prejudice
or the abuse of authority.
I can’t see lust for power.
I can’t see manipulation.
I can’t see rage or anger
or selfish ambition.

I can’t see unforgiveness.
I can’t see hate or envy.

¹ Poem by Godfrey Birtill

I can't see stupid fighting
or bitterness, or jealousy.
I can't see empire building.
I can't see self-importance.
I can't see back-stabbing
or vanity or arrogance.

I see surrender, sacrifice, salvation,
humility, righteousness, faithfulness, grace, forgiveness,
love! Love ... love...

When I stop! ... at the cross
I can see the love of God.

Amen.