

CHRISTUS REX

Jeremiah 23. 1-8
Colossians 1. 11-20
Luke 2. 33-43

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Today, the last Sunday in the liturgical year, we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King. We would not have been able to say so one hundred years ago, since this particular feast was only inaugurated in 1925 by Pope Pius XI, as a reaction to the abuse of power by various states and nations of the world. It was hoped that by establishing a feast day of such solemnity, people would understand that the Church has a right to its own freedom; and that Christ must reign in our hearts and minds, as he must reign in our wills and bodies.

Christ the King. What is our contemporary understanding of kingship? Is it pageantry? Autocracy? Thankfully, we've had little in the way of autocratic behaviour from the inhabitants of Buckingham Palace for a good while. And what does kingship entail? Wealth? Power? Responsibility? Rule? Perhaps all of the above. But then where does that lead?

The life of Christ was, in fact, book-ended by kingship. It is the Magi who, when seeking him at his birth, asked 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 to the top of his cross: 'This is the King of the Jews'. He is the King who began his earthly life in a stable and who ended it as the victim of a cruel public execution.

Our Lord's own reaction to the question as to whether he was a King was maddeningly elusive, to Pilate at least. 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Pilate asked Jesus in John's gospel (18. 33). And Christ's answer surely did not reassure him. He said, '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.' And our Lord continued, '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 (18. 36-37).

The gospel of Mark also emphasises the importance of Jesus's kingly role. His role was not, Mark stresses, to exercise lordship over people; but on the contrary to minister to them and to be their servant. In the weeks that lead up to Christmas, we will be considering readings from the prophet Isaiah that speak of the role of the servant. The threads of kingship and servant, of authority and servitude, are so closely intertwined that they become one yarn with which the fabric of Christ's ministry was woven.

Yet as our Old Testament reading reminded us, Christ the King is also Christ the Shepherd, and he is descended from David, who was both king and shepherd (Ps 78. 70-72). The two roles of Shepherd and King cannot be separated. They represent a paradox, if you like.

When the prophet Jeremiah wrote the passage that we have before us, Judah was about to be punished for its unfaithfulness to God. Unfortunately, much of its unfaithfulness stemmed from the fact that its 'shepherds', or its civil and spiritual leaders, did not care for them; in fact, they did more to lead the people of Judah away from faith in the Messiah than towards it.

Because of this, punishment was to come for the leaders of Judah. The armies of Babylon would destroy Jerusalem. Many nobles and priests would perish; and those who did not would be exiled.

But God intended to show mercy to his people, to his scattered flock. In spite of the fact that his people had followed the ways of the wicked priests and kings instead of listening to faithful prophets like Jeremiah, God decided that he would be merciful; and he said, 'I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.' From the very beginning of time, it was God's intention that not one of his sheep be lost.

And God promised to raise up shepherds over his people who would shepherd them. The ultimate Shepherd who would be raised up by God would be our Lord, the Good Shepherd (Jn 10), the one who knows his sheep by name. Christ is the Good Shepherd who leads his sheep and who is followed by his sheep, because they recognise his voice.

As our thoughts turn to Jesus who is both Shepherd and King, we do well to ask ourselves in what ways we might need to experience the Shepherd's love, protection and care afresh today. Perhaps we are like that one sheep that lost its way and was no longer with the ninety-nine: perhaps we feel helpless, or overwhelmed, or that we need to be rescued somehow. The Good Shepherd knows each one of his flock. And he knows what each of us needs in order to be restored.

But the image of the Good Shepherd does not stop there. Christ, the Shepherd and King, is also the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. There is a sense in which shepherds do this each time they lie down at night at the entrance to the sheepfold. Out in the wilderness, shepherds face the risk of robbers and wild

animals; and therefore risk their own lives in caring for their sheep. In a similar but much more significant way, our Lord the Good Shepherd chose to give up his life for his sheep when he died on the cross.

In the Jewish tradition, there was an expectation that one day, a messianic shepherd would come who would look after God's people with care (Ez 34. 1-25). He would protect them with responsibility and love. Jews who looked hopefully to that day no doubt anticipated the arrival of a great ruler; one who would act with power and might; one who would truly reign.

The image that we have before us in Luke's gospel is, as we saw a moment ago, indeed that of a King. Yet the King's position on the cross does not denote power, but rather powerlessness. It does not indicate rule or control, but rather surrender. The cross is an odd sort of throne for a King; and his crown of thorns is a strange crown for someone who in fact is the King of Kings.

And yet, on this feast day, we dare to proclaim the Kingship of the one who died on that cross, and whose birth was announced to the Virgin Mary. We remember that Our Lady, only a young girl, stood perplexed and pondering before the angel Gabriel as he announced, 'You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end' (Lk 1. 30-33).

Dear friends, this kingdom has now come. Today, and even now, Christ the King rules with authority and power; and his love, compassion and mercy are those of the Good Shepherd. The mission of Christ the King on earth was to save us sheep who are lost; and to establish the reign of God in our hearts. I wonder, which Shepherd and which King are we truly following? Amen.