Parish of Esher
Christ Church, Esher with St George's, West End

SERMON

Christ the King, 25 November 2018
Daniel 7.9-10, 13-14; Psalm 93; John 18.33-37

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This last Sunday before Advent is also a celebration of Christ the King. Coming at the end of our annual liturgical cycle, it sums up what Jesus and the Christian Church is all about, namely the coming and continuation of the Kingdom or reign of God in this world and the next. What does this mean for us?

At first sight the model of absolute but benign Kingship is not natural for us. We now have a constitutional monarchy while many other countries have a republican system. Less fortunate ones have despotic regimes. In Biblical times, as seen in the Hebrew Scriptures and those of the New Testament, Kingship was accepted and respected widely. God was worshipped and followed as supreme King. The Jewish community longed for the time when God would establish his Kingdom or reign, a time when a Messiah would establish a kingdom where justice and peace would prevail, oppressors would be overthrown and people of faith would be vindicated.

The book of Daniel, which contains today's reading, probably took its final form during persecution of the Jews by Antiochus IV Epiphanes which started in 167BCE. It contains visions which hold out promise of deliverance in the new Kingdom of God for those who remain faithful in the face of persecution. In our reading the figure of the Ancient One with white clothing and hair like wool denotes eternity and wisdom. The climax is the coming of the one like a human being, who has a kingship that shall never be destroyed. This is the origin of the title or identity "Son of Man" which is given to Jesus in the New Testament. The fundamental message is that evil, embodied in the actions of desperate rulers, is ultimately subject to divine

judgement and is overcome by faithfulness to goodness and truth which may lead to persecution and death. We can easily identify with that, particularly when we have an American president who dismisses reputable media as fake news, a Russian one who dismisses hard evidence with disdain, a Saudi Crown Prince who attributes the foul murder of a critical journalist to 15 rogue security officials while the American President does not really want to know what truly happened.

Jesus was rooted entirely in the hope and cause of the coming of the Kingdom or reign of God. Mark's gospel says "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news". This theme dominates his ministry and teaching. It became clear to him and his followers that he was to be the central figure, the initiator and role model of the Kingdom. However he did not fulfil expectations of a Messiah who would lead a movement to overthrow the Roman rulers. He took from Isaiah the model of the servant Messiah, who would overcome evil and attract people to God through a life of service, forgiveness and inclusiveness. He would never return hatred for hatred. He would pursue goodness and truth, as seen in the Daniel reading. That is why we heard in our reading from John: "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom was from this world my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth". Again, we say Amen to that today.

Like Jesus, the Church should see its primary purpose as being an agent of the Kingdom and not as an end in itself. Of course it is hugely important that the church should continue to thrive and grow, in worship, prayer, teaching and fellowship, and try to be an exemplar of the Kingdom by the way in which it conducts its own life and affairs. However this is in order to promote the Kingdom, not the church per se.

We come to church hopefully to experience a little bit of the Kingdom and to be renewed in vision and energy, in order to be sent out to change the world for the better. This means being role models of goodness and truth and justice; it means trying to challenge and change harmful and hateful

behaviours and the values and cultures which underlie them. We must not assume that Christians have a monopoly of goodness and truth; we must be humble and respectful towards people of other faith and no faith who share Kingdom values. We should co-operate with them in trying to shape a better world, a world which begins to look a bit more like the Kingdom of God. Here are a few examples: challenging the long-hours working culture which destroys work-life balance and spoils family life; challenging zero-hours contracts unless someone chooses that arrangement; encouraging the service ethic rather than one driven mainly by financial reward; questioning the ratio of top executive salaries to those of most employees; getting involved in national and local politics.

I left traditional parish ministry and became a worker-priest fifty years ago to try to make the point that Christians, mainly lay people, should exercise most of their ministry outside the church. I hoped that I might be a role model and support to them. Of course there has to be both ordained and lay ministry within the church in order to keep the church in existence, but the balance is critical. I suggest that all too often lay people and self-supporting ordained ministers (the successors to worker-priests) are too church focussed. This may be because we over-burden them with church responsibilities or because we feel more comfortable in the church and are avoiding applying our faith outside it. It is probably more likely that we fail to envision, energise, equip and support people for their daily work and life.

Jesus Christ the King came to open up the possibility of God's Kingdom or reign in this world and by his resurrection assured us that His Kingdom of goodness and truth will be fully established beyond death. Today let us commit ourselves and our church to be more effective agents and role models of that Kingdom. Amen