

## Readings for the Feast of Christ the King

24<sup>th</sup> November 2024

### First Reading: Daniel 7:9-10:13-14

As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousand served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgement, and the books were opened.

As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

### Second Reading: Revelation 1:4b-8

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

### Gospel: St John 18:33b-37

Pilate asked Jesus, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' 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?'

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.' 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.'

## **A Reflection for the Feast of Christ the King**

Today, we come to last Sunday in Church year and the Feast of Christ the King – a fairly recent introduction to our liturgical calendar. It's a day to celebrate God's kingship. But what does that idea of kingship mean to us in this day and age?

In this country, and in a few others, we have a hereditary monarchy, a family whose lives excite curiosity for some but whose role is largely ceremonial rather than a position of power. We may have loved or hated the coronation of King Charles last year, but the reality of it is remote and the monarch has little impact on our daily lives. The majority of people in the world don't live in monarchies, albeit that some heads of state still behave like absolute monarchs.

In Biblical times, to be a monarch was about absolute power, to have a leadership role with political, religious, social and economic aspects for governing peoples and territories. When done well, monarchs cared for and protected their people. When not done well, the people were oppressed and exploited. The Bible's view about kings, for they were almost all men, is ambivalent. For many peoples of that region, there was a close link between the power of their kings and their gods and ancient Israel was no different. They had kings because they petitioned God for them in order to be like their neighbours, but those kings proved to be a mixed blessing. By Jesus' time, there were local puppet kings such as Herod the Great, but real power rested with the Roman Emperors who were also revered as gods.

In today's Gospel, when Jesus was brought before the Roman Governor of Judea, Pilate, the charge against Jesus was that he claimed to be the 'King of the Jews'. Although Jesus is reported in the Gospels as having spoken about God's kingdom, or the kingdom of heaven, on many occasions, none of the Gospels record him as having described himself as 'King of the Jews'. With one exception, this title is only used by others in the context of his trial and crucifixion. The exception? In Matthew's Gospel, the wise men came from the east seeking the child who had been born 'King of the Jews'.

Although Jesus did not describe himself as such, it is likely that his accusers twisted his teaching about the Kingdom to frame their charge, as is clear from Pilate's question: 'Are you the King of the Jews?'. And, of course, we know that Pilate was on to something, that Jesus was and is a king. But Pilate also had pre-conceived ideas about the nature of kingship that prevented him hearing and understanding what Jesus was saying.

Pilate was probably quite anxious. As governor of a small but rebellious province of the Empire someone declaring themselves a king would not be good for him if his superiors were to have heard of it. It would be seen as a potential threat to the supposedly all-powerful god-Emperor, a threat that it was his responsibility to keep in check.

In contrast, Jesus was a prisoner, condemned by his own people and handed over to Pilate because they did not have the authority to execute him. He didn't look like a king, he didn't look powerful, and Pilate was clearly puzzled. Yet, paradoxically, Jesus does have power, Jesus was the one in control here, patient and pursuing his own mission. In today's passage from Revelation, Jesus is described as the 'faithful witness'. But what he said made little sense to Pilate who simply wanted a clear-cut answer to his question 'Are you a king?' Instead, what he gets is 'My kingdom is not from this world'. Note that word 'from'. The King James version said 'My kingdom is not of this world' and I think that has the potential for misunderstanding in a modern context. God's kingdom is from heaven, from God but most definitely is of this world in the sense that it encompasses all of creation.

Last week, I said that God's kingdom is not like earthly kingdoms, not about outward magnificence and buildings, not about earthly power structures, probably the concepts Pilate had in mind. As Jesus says here, if it were like that, his followers would be fighting to keep him from being handed over. In this world kings have people under

them, subjects, armies; it's only with the support of other people, whether voluntary or forced, that someone can be a monarch and exert power.

But although Jesus was descended from King David, he had no interest in nationalism and politics, no interest in money or worldly success, no interest in earthly power, especially power that exploits others. In this Gospel passage, he goes on to give us a few clues of how God's kingdom is different. We need to use them in conjunction with what has been said elsewhere to build a fuller picture.

Jesus said 'You say that I am a king'. So maybe 'king' is not the word Jesus himself would have chosen. The word king implies one person over others – as I said, kings have subjects. But followers of Jesus are also described as children of God; Jesus spoke of brothers and sisters, and, as Paul said in his letter to the Romans, 'if children then also joint heirs with Christ'. That is not an image of hierarchy, of a king with subjects under him. Jesus also said that 'whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Servant kingship is a very different model.

Jesus continued by saying that he was born and came into world 'to testify to the truth'. The truth we read of in the Gospels is of the king who is a servant, who came to teach and heal and to reconcile people to God. A king 'who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood' as today's passage from Revelation puts it. A king who gave everything, including his life, for his people.

And Jesus finished here by saying that those who belong to him will listen to his voice. That means following in his ways, sharing his love, being people of peace and reconciliation in the world, standing up for justice. It's a sacrificial lifestyle.

The passage from Revelation also says that Jesus made us to be 'a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father'. This is the same idea as in the first letter of Peter which says that Jesus' followers are 'a royal priesthood'. In the Old Testament, the roles of king and priest were separate. Kings were given special responsibilities by God to lead the people and care for them – to be their shepherd. The priest blessed the people, offered the sacrifices and was a mediator between the people and God.

But it was prophesied that the Messiah would fulfil both roles, indeed would be prophet, priest and king. And we see that coming to fruition in Jesus. Jesus was widely recognised as a prophet in his lifetime, and also referred to himself as such when his ministry at Nazareth was rejected saying 'Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown.' As priest, Jesus repeatedly blessed people throughout his ministry, he offered himself as the once for all sacrifice on the Cross and became the one mediator between God and his people. As king, Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who leads by example, as a servant rather than an overlord or warrior- what we might call soft power today.

And we, as the royal priesthood, are called upon to live our lives the same way. To share in the prophetic, priestly and kingly ministry of Jesus Christ, serving the world and serving and worshipping God. Today we celebrate this servant king who lives on through us. We stand with Jesus, working for justice and mercy, telling of God's unfailing love, and looking forward in hope to the time when Jesus will return in glory.