

Sermon given by Canon Dr Esther Elliott

St Peter's church, Nottingham

Sunday 26th November 2017

Christ the King

Ephesians 1.15-end Matthew 25.31-end

Today is the feast of Christ the King. It is a recent addition to the liturgical calendar and it is celebrated on the last day of Ordinary Time, which is also the Sunday before the start of Advent in the church's year. You can, therefore, take your pick whether you use the theme, the idea, the concept of Christ as King as a way of gathering up and reviewing all the odd bits of theology and feasts and festivals and the long haul of Ordinary Time since Pentecost that is just about completed, or whether you use it as a way of preparing yourself, frontloading if you like, for Advent or Christmas. Of course, as good Anglicans, we also have the option to do both at the same time.

And if we were going to use today to examine good leadership, good Kingship, the sort of King Christ is and was and will be, it would, of course be framed around the idea of servant leadership, kingship which considers the poor, the hungry and those on the margins of society first, not last, or not at all. Let's take that as a given, and instead of examining the identity of Christ the King and the identity of leaders who would lead as Christ would lead, I invite you to explore what this sort of leadership means for the identity of those who are followers, those who are the subjects of Christ the King.

Quite a while ago I discovered something very disturbing in the Derby Cathedral bookshop. It was a version of the Bible for young children called the Princess Bible. The version I saw came as a book in a pink cardboard cover in the shape of a handbag with pink feathers all over it. Designed apparently to appeal to every girl's inner princess and assure her that she is, in fact, God's little princess. Interestingly, there was no Bible for Princes, simply a Bible in combat colours designed to appeal to boys. My first reaction was to be furiously angry at the gender stereotypes and that gender stereotypes were being used to sell our sacred text. That hasn't gone away, but on reflection, I think there is something more deeply disturbing going on.

Princesses abound in the culture we are steeped in. They are an image, a notion, that provides a ready-made identity to people, usually girls, but I note that when the Church of England recently published some guidance to schools about bullying and sexual and gender identity it was reported in the press as "boys should be allowed to wear tiaras and tutus" as well. Princesses, in our culture, are pretty, savvy, loved, secure, confident, valued, and treated very well. It is an identity worth trying out, trying on and inhabiting. It disturbs me to think that we perhaps sometimes inadvertently bring this cultural icon to bear on our faith; as though it were that followers of Christ the King are Princesses and Princes, we are special, superior, the elite, the privileged.

Our Gospel reading today is hard hitting. On one level, it doesn't pull any punches about telling us what to do in order to win the favour of the king – feed the hungry, welcome the strangers, clothe the naked, look after the sick and visit those in prison. That's the

bar to check ourselves off against as disciples of Christ the King. And if you can tick the boxes you can rest in the knowledge that you are part of the elite, the privileged, those called righteous who gain eternal life.

There is another interpretation of this passage of scripture which takes into account that the audience that first read it would be people experiencing persecution. Those being judged are “the nations” and they are being judged for how they have responded to the church as it is being persecuted. If they haven’t fed and clothed and visited those being persecuted for their Christian faith, they will go away into eternal punishment. It is as though the author is saying to the persecuted Church, don’t worry; things might look rough now, but in the long game, ultimately Christ the King has your back. This interpretation also paints the church as the privileged – people will be ultimately judged for how they have treated us.

Our other reading today from Ephesians is perhaps an almost breathless profusion of longing for those reading the letter to understand Christ’s sovereign place in the universe and the church’s participation in that. If you count yourself part of the church, it is perhaps hard work with our current cultural lenses not to feel like a princess, prince or member of the royal court; privileged, part of the elite, full of confidence in your position by the time you have finished reading this bit, never mind the whole letter.

Any yet. The Biblical text is not a self-help manual for the times we need some self-confidence and to feel special. Primarily, it is not

about us, it comes to paint a picture for us of a God who is a glorious knowable and unknowable mystery. And what we know of God is that God is love and that love extends to the whole universe. It is not just for those who are in the church, or those who can follow an ethical code of social action. God loves everyone. In the reign of Christ the King there are no princess, no princes, no elites, no privileged, special people, no lords and ladies of the court. Everyone is equally loved, valued and honoured.

We often talk about Christ’s Kingdom as the upside down, or the inside out Kingdom – the norms of the world turned on its head. The more I think about it, the more I realise it is far more revolutionary than simply the world turned upside down, logic reversed. When love, truth, mercy and justice finally and completed rule relationships between humans and humans and the divine the world will look like something we can’t even begin to comprehend, something beyond our current logic, our current mapping, understandings and imagination. Perhaps the very simple message of our gospel reading today is that Christ actually loves each individual enough to keep an eye on how we treat each other and cares enough that such details are of ultimate importance.

In Christ’s Kingdom those of us who call ourselves His followers are as loved, as valued as privileged as everyone else. We are as loved as those who use this building and our grounds as a temporary home, as a place to take drugs. We are as loved as Mugabe, as Trump, as the people who bombed a mosque in Egypt this week, as your boss at work. We are as loved as those of other faiths, as those of other countries, as those of other Christian traditions. We are as loved as those who identify as something other than how we

personally identify. We are as loved as those we love and those we find hard to like, never mind love. We are as loved as those of us who experience persecution, violence of all sorts and those of us who live by violence and the sword. We are all loved and valued equally. That is profoundly revolutionary. It is a half-hidden truth which is world-shattering. We are all loved beyond measure, boundless and free. This is the truth in every soul, the light in every face, the spark in every relationship.

And so, we feed each other, we clothe each other, we visit each other when we are in distress not to build a new society on earth, not to hasten the time when Christ will come back, not to win favour with the Almighty, but simply because we honour the value Christ the King places on each individual soul. And so, we start to wait for Christmas, to paraphrase the poet Malcolm Guite; Christmas that sets the centre on the edge, the fringe of empire, far from privilege, the day the world is re-aligned. May our waiting be filled with longing, with hope and with persistent endeavours to love, to recognise that everyone else is loved and to honour the King who loves.