

Christ the king Year A

Our cyclical church year begins with Advent and ends with this day, Christ the King. "Always, we begin again," as the Benedictine saying affirms.

The festivals and seasons we celebrate in church have developed and evolved over time, some have gone on for centuries, with over a millennium of tradition and history enriching them. They mark the events of Jesus' life: his birth, his journey to the cross, his death, his resurrection, his ascension, and his sending of the Holy Spirit to remain with us.

Through our liturgical church calendar, year after year the stories are told. Year after year we adapt and adjust the traditions of how to mark them. They shape us in a multitude of ways as we become part of the stories—and they become part of us in our churches and in our families.

I am sure many of you have your own traditions around major feast days in the church year, have you ever wondered how or why they started. In my family during advent, we had an advent wreath as a table decoration, at Sunday lunch the appropriate candles were lit. I now have the advent candle holder and try to remember to do the same and continue the tradition! On Easter morning before my brother and I were up or even awake my father would sing the first verse of the hymn 'Christians awake salute the happy dawn'!

There is a saying that if we do something 2 years in a row in church it becomes tradition!

What then is this tradition of Christ the King? I don't remember it growing up, do you?

It dates back all the way to...1925. Yes! This tradition is not even 100 years old.

Why did it become part of our liturgical calendar? It seems that with after the devastating First World War nationalism and secularism were on the rise and Christianity was challenged to counter it, Pope Pius XI instituted the Feast of Christ the King to lend courage to Christians whose faith might be flagging or feeling battered.

Initially, the feast was celebrated on the last Sunday of October but was then moved in 1969 to its current place in the liturgical calendar to be a vision of Christ to which the rest of the year points. In 1970, the Roman Catholic Church moved the festival from its late-October date to the last Sunday in the church year: its importance in the calendar increased, it was also adopted by the wider church, including the Anglican Communion of which the Church of England is part and becoming a fixed date in the calendar

It is a climactic celebration that focuses on Christ as glorified Lord and King - a powerful reminder that praise of his Kingship is always the theme of the calendar. It deepens awareness of the final end of all things in the triumph of Christ. At the same time as bringing the liturgical year to an end it also looks forward to its turning again on Advent Sunday.

The spirituality of this festival should not be overlooked or understated. No one recognised this more than Henri Nouwen who wrote in his *Sabbatical Journey*: "on the last Sunday of the liturgical year, Christ is presented to us as the mocked King on the Cross as well of the King of the universe. The greatest humiliation and the greatest victory are both shown to us in today's liturgy. It is important to look at this humiliated and victorious Christ before we start the new liturgical year with the celebration of Advent. All through the year we have to stay close to the humiliation as well as to the victory of Christ, because we are called to live both in our own daily lives."

Worship of Christ on his throne can lead on to the message of Christ as Judge, the focus of our readings however, is not so much on what Jesus as the great king and judge is like, but on how we, as followers of Jesus, have responded to God's call in our lives.

This is about discipleship and so it is about us.

Think for a moment about the churches here in Purley/ or the Church of England. What do you hear about other churches? What are we known for?

Of course, all church communities and individual Christians are supposed to be living out our faith, bringing about God's kingdom here on earth while we await Jesus.

The community in Ephesus was noticed because of its reputation. The author of the epistle to the Ephesians was impressed by the word-of-mouth reputation that the community has for demonstrating their faith in love.

They don't just get together to do nice things for other people and talk about faith.

Their belief that Jesus is risen and sits at the right hand of God is core to who they are, they have experienced God's power in their lives. They have allowed that experience to dwell within and change them. This transformation informs and motivates everything they do, individually and as a community.

I wonder what our reputation is?

This passage from Ephesians is known as a thanksgiving prayer, it tells us something else about what God values in a community: people knowing their destination.

They have a goal and because they know what direction they're going; they have become people of hope. I wonder if, we sometimes get the meanings of 'faith' and 'hope' confused, but not the Ephesians. They know that faith means you entrust your life to Christ today, in the present tense; and hope is about the future, about where our present trust in Christ will eventually lead us.

This understanding of Christian life reflects one of the mottos of the Jesuits. They are to be contemplatives in action. In other words, to be grounded and centred in their faith in Jesus, so that they know where God was calling them in the world.

If we are all contemplatives that don't do anything with the experience of God's power that we have, then what's the point in our contemplation?

If all we do is reach out to others, but don't go back to the wellspring of God's living water and drink deeply, then we've missed our call and become empty shells. We must have both.

Our Gospel from Matthew the story of the sheep and goats asks us a searching question that can be difficult to bear: are we admirers of Jesus or are we followers?

There is a church sign that has gone around on Facebook for the past few years and it says, "Sometimes I want to ask God why [God] allows poverty, famine, and injustice in the world when [God] could do something about it, but I'm afraid [God] might just ask me the same question."

As Christians, we believe that God has full claim on our lives. We are coming into the season of Advent next week and are reminded that God loved us so much that God would become human—become one of us—so that we would fully understand what that claim was and how deep the love goes.

How do we translate this love to others?

Our Gospel today is clear that when we feed or welcome or give clothing or visit the sick or those in prison that we are, in turn, feeding, welcoming, clothing, and visiting him.

When people respond to human need—or fail to respond—they are responding or failing to respond to Jesus himself.

It is for all these reasons that the people of St Swithuns some 40 years ago began a new tradition on Christ the King and it has become appropriately known a 'Gift Sunday' in the past it has included a stewardship campaign and how we use our time/talents/ and money for God's Kingdom. More recently there is more emphasis on the parcel scheme, it is an outward and visible sign of responding to our calling to care for our neighbours. This is also reflected in the charitable giving that both PCC's have as priority within our budget's.

Our celebration of Christ the King 'Gift Sunday' has evolved into a Benefice celebration. Who knows how it will continue to evolve in the future, maybe next year we should celebrate all we do as a benefice and to recommit for the coming year to follow God's call in our lives? A commitment that makes us openly and realistically reflect on how we give of our time/talents /money and what more we might do in the coming year!

Through our belief in Christ, we have the power to heal other people's lives, just by our presence in theirs. We receive our strength, not from ourselves, but from God.

On this Christ the King Sunday, our scriptures are clear about the "immeasurable greatness of God's power for those who believe."

As we complete another turning of the wheel of liturgical time, may we renew our commitment to be grounded in this power to seek Christ in all persons and love our neighbour as ourselves, even though we may look foolish to the world for loving so lavishly, and we may fail. With God's help, we can also, thankfully, begin again. AMEN.