

6.30pm Evensong – 21st November 2010
Christ the King – Year C

1 Samuel 8: 4-20
John 18: 33-37

At the end of the church year, we observe a tradition that dates from the time the three magi bent their knees in homage to the Baby of Bethlehem. We name Jesus as King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. We hold him up as the one anointed by God to be the Messiah, the one chosen to be the deliverer and the saviour of the world. Being a king really meant something in Jesus' day. A king was a powerful human being. A king spoke and common people trembled. For nations, their king was the only means of securing order and peace, personifying in one person, civilization and domestic tranquillity. He was to be honoured, respected and served, but also revered, feared and obeyed. He was of upmost importance - so much so that time itself was calculated on the basis of when the King began his reign. The question I ask this evening is - What does it mean, for us, to name Jesus as King? Especially when you consider what we have done to some kings, in our not too recent past. Today there is often little respect, honour or reverence, for those who rule over us. No one, it seems, is worthy of our unquestioning obedience. We have reduced our royalty to being like soap-opera stars, and our politicians as corrupt, uncaring, or out of touch. And the laws that they make we often call unfair and arbitrary, as we seek to get around them. So the image of Jesus as King, is an image that is hard to get hold of, and might be an image that belongs to stories that begin with the words "**Once upon a time ...**"

So what does it mean to call Jesus King? In our second reading this evening, Pontius Pilate clearly wondered, albeit for different reasons than us today. Pilate, who served the most powerful king in his world, knew what a king should be. He knew about the power that a King has, the authority that he wields, and the unquestioning obedience that he demands. Pilate was a creature of his time, who knew and accepted the rules, and was charged with making and enforcing those rules. One of which was, that anyone who claimed to be a king, over and against the authority of Caesar, was to be executed, and this was a rule that Pilate had no scruples about enforcing. When Jesus is brought before Pilate, the charge against him was that he was one who unlawfully claimed to be the King of the Jews. The very idea that the bruised and battered man that stood before him could be taken for a king, must have seemed ridiculous to Pilate. Nevertheless Pilate does his duty, and asks Jesus if the charge against him is true? Jesus answers Pilate that he is a king - but that his kingdom is not of this world. And then he says: "**If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish authorities.**" Pilate understands this - he knows what a King is, and after checking Jesus once more by asking him "**So you are a king ?**" he tells Jesus' accusers that he finds no case against him. Pilate just cannot image Jesus as a King. In the end Pilate allows Jesus to be crucified with the word's "**King of the Jews**" posted over his head, but does not believe what he had ordered to be written.

And today, I wonder if it is the same for us. Do we, like Pilate, name Jesus as King, but for one reason or another just don't take it seriously? We take a lot of things about Jesus rather lightly, and if we do accept them and believe them, do we understand them? Some take the words of Jesus, that were meant to describe the nature and the source of his authority, and twist them so that his kingdom ends up being "other-worldly". They accept and believe that Jesus is a King, but regard his kingdom as being something we hope to experience someday, but not as something for us now. Or, if it is now, it is only in some vague "spiritual sense." It is not meant to have a real impact on how we conduct our lives together as social beings. Some do this by saying that business is business, and that religion has no place in it, just as it has no place in politics. Others withhold from Christ the obedience he asks of us in witnessing to others about him, because it is too pushy, or because they have no wish to offend. They refuse to obey his command to love and forgive others, as He loves and forgives us, because the person they have a beef against doesn't deserve to be loved or forgiven. They fail to help their brothers and sisters, and to contribute to the needs of others, because they have "dedicated to the Lord" in some other way. Still others accept and believe that Jesus is King, but try to force Christ's teachings upon others, as if His kingdom was in this world. They do this by insisting that laws be made to compel prayers in schools, or banning gambling, and working to enact legislation to abolish abortion clinics.

So what does it mean for us to name Jesus King? Well, it certainly doesn't mean any of the above. Jesus is not a worldly king. His power is not from this world, nor is it meant to be exercised in the way that the world exercises power. Jesus exercised his power by serving others, forgiving others, healing others, giving to others, and by sacrificing himself for others. His power is the power of truth, the power of faith, the power of hope, the power of love - the power of life itself. But Jesus' kingdom is not something that is "pie in the sky." It is real, it is present, and it makes demands upon us. Jesus calls us to obedience, to faith, and to love, here and now, but He does not force or compel us. He calls us to allow God to enter into our lives. He invites us to walk by the light that he himself has shed. And he shows us in his own person, and in the lives of those who follow him, that when we turn to him, that there is healing and wholeness to be found.

But Pilate's question to Jesus – **“Are you a king ?”** - remains an important, fundamental question. It is a question about sovereignty, about rule, about who is in charge when it is dark and the world is falling apart. About who to turn to when we, or others, are in need. About who we should go to when we seek justice for others, and when we look for mercy for ourselves. Jesus answers that He is in charge, not in the way of the world, with force and violence, but with love and with life. He answers that he has control over the darkness. He is the one that, because of the faithfulness of God to him, vanquishes death, and brings healing and peace to all who follow him. It is this king, that I name today and seek to follow. It is this king that I pray you will also name and follow, for in Him is life, and that abundantly. Amen.