

CHESTER CATHEDRAL 21st November 2010

COLOSSIANS 1 v11-20

LUKE 23 v33-43

Theme: The Kingship of Christ

The Sunday Papers love it:

“William to be King,
Kate to be Queen.”

God willing, one day but for now, not withstanding the inevitable hype from the media, most folk wish the newly engaged couple well, recognising that their love for each other has already been tested over several years of public attention and interest. And, like our Dean, both blessed by their time at the University of St Andrews – well that should stand them in good stead!

All the attention on this particular couple stems of course from the fact that Prince William is second in line to the throne. And with him and his father Prince Charles in mind, it's interesting to consider how we understand Kingship today. On this last Sunday of the Church's year our Bible readings direct us to consider the Kingship of Christ, but most of us here are citizens of the United Kingdom in the 21st century, so what are our basic assumptions about royalty and monarchy and kingship?

Well, things have changed a great deal since the first William, King of England, came to power in 1066. He was a warrior king, literally fighting for power against King Harold on Senlac Hill, near Hastings. There was no Parliament then to moderate his powers - his place at court, and rule across the country was absolute, ruthlessly enforced during his reign, and land and titles parcelled out as reward for those nobles he perceived to be faithful and loyal.

Prince William, by contrast, finds himself in a world where our Royal Family is seen as a quaint anachronism by some, and much admired by others. Admired when seen as a positive ingredient of stable government. Admired when seen as embodying worthwhile values, justice, unity and truth. That is of course an enormous responsibility and often a real burden. Which is why we need to uphold regularly in our prayers our Queen, and Prince Charles and Prince William.

So that's all part of our context when we talk about Kings and Queens, but as we see from our 2 readings today, to talk about Jesus Christ as King is something of a different order, an idea that surprised and shocked people of his own time, but a concept we need to grapple with if we are to understand more about his kingdom of love. First, there is his rule and his reign, the scope and extent of his kingship. St Paul waxes lyrical about this in the opening chapter of his letter to the Colossians, so much so that this passage is regarded as one of the early Christian Hymns:

“He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation;
He himself is before all things,
and in him all things hold together”.

Is Paul talking about Jesus, the carpenter's son from Nazareth? Because the implication of Paul's words is breathtaking: The man Jesus rejected and condemned by the Jewish religious leaders, whose actions were applauded by Paul himself. Jesus is enthroned as God's son, his rule extends everywhere, and his reign is without limit.

As we read these words through it is clear that they are not “spur of the moment” words. In fact, they have taken shape through the crucible of Paul’s own experience of joy and suffering, his long difficult journey from zealous Pharisee to dedicated apostle of Christ.

This is Paul’s creed. But as the words flow they come out as a hymn with rhythm and vitality, testifying to the fact that a living faith in Christ is never dry doctrine but an encounter, an entering into a new dimension of life. That is what Paul is so keen to convey to the Colossians, and to us and all who will listen:

” For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

So to the Cross, for here literally is the crux of the matter – either an insoluble problem or the solution, the key to it all. Many who stood by on that Friday through the morning into the heat of the day saw only defeat and failure. The inscription “This is the King of the Jews” seemed only to invite jeering and derision, mockery and contempt. “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.” Natural human instinct – Number One comes first – so surely Jesus would save his own skin if he was really King. Then defeat his enemies in a conventional, understandable way with legions of vengeful angels? But others were beginning to understand. And Luke, alone of the Gospel writers, records the words of the penitent thief. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

St Paul talks of rescue and reconciliation; well, it is right here, from the throne of the Cross, that King Jesus inaugurates his new kingdom. Not through edicts and royal proclamations but by the offering and sacrifice of himself. His words are necessarily few but they are revolutionary. “Father forgive them.” No King has ever blessed his mortal enemies like this. This is what catches the attention of the penitent thief, and though dying himself he is outraged by the injustice of what is happening. “This man has done nothing wrong.” In the extremity of his own suffering, it is the thief who recognises the reality. He begins to see where true power and glory reside. Not in regimes that require brute force to sustain them, but in sacrificial love and forgiveness. That much he did understand and while there was the glimmer of a chance, he wanted to be included in a kingdom like that. “Jesus, remember me

There are plenty of despots and cruel regimes around in our own day. Thank God for the democratic freedoms which we enjoy, where in this country monarchy plays its part. And especially for the members of the Church of England. It is worth pondering that our own Queen regularly prays, as a committed Christian believer, for forgiveness, and help and guidance from God our Father through the saving grace of Jesus Christ. That is what enables her to do her job and to cope with any trials and tribulations.

The Kingdom of Jesus Christ is one of invitation and gift. The invitation extends to royal personages, penitent thieves and everything in between – which is good news for you and me. The gift is something we will focus on specifically just one month from now. The gift of God himself, prepared and willing to be human, vulnerable and weak so that any person at all who recognises the King might enter into the Kingdom – with a right royal welcome.