

Sunday Homily

CHRIST THE KING

21 NOVEMBER 2021

YEAR B

"You say that I am a king."

John 18:37

Illustration

The cathedral was busy when the fire alarm went off. The office staff were expecting an evacuation practice, but not till the following week. So they had not quite got around to reading their instructions. In the Chapter House, the Mothers' Union coffee morning was in full swing. Anxious heads poked out of doors into the corridor. Were the alarm bells being tested? Was it a drill? What were they to do?

Then the head verger appeared. "Evacuate the building," he announced very clearly and calmly. At once people grabbed their coats and headed outside. Someone was in charge, so it was all right. And pretty soon the DJ practising for a wedding reception later that day in the Cathedral Centre had been told to turn his smoke machine off, and life was back to normal.

Gospel Teaching

In the world, with all its alarms, who is in charge? Today the Church makes a bold assertion. Today we celebrate the feast of Christ the King. Who is in charge of the world? Christ is, we proclaim.

When the Gospels discuss the kingship of Christ, they do it in a very particular context. The land where Jesus lived was occupied and ruled by the Romans. And the Romans had an emperor whose rule was absolute. Tiberius ruled by force and by fear. Under his rule, Roman citizens lived secure, knowing that no one would dare to attack them, so great would be the reprisals. But for subject peoples like the Jews things were very different. The emperor was their lord and master, and they had better keep quiet and obey him. For anyone else to claim authority was treason of the most dangerous kind, and would be punished immediately and severely.

This is what lies behind Jesus' conversation with Pilate, the Roman governor, running Judaea on behalf of Tiberius. If Jesus has indeed claimed to be a king, as Pilate has been told, he will immediately be executed. There is room for only one king in this empire, and the divine emperor already has that position. Pilate wants to find out whether Jesus is setting himself up over against the emperor, because, if he is, that makes his life easy. He can just sign the death warrant, get the Jewish leadership off his back, and get on with oppressing the people and

making money out of them. Jesus, however, does not want to talk about the kind of kingship Pilate is thinking of. He wants to talk about truth.

The account of this conversation is written long after the events it describes, after the resurrection. The author of the Fourth Gospel knows that Tiberius is dead but Jesus is alive. He knows that there is a power here which has much more claim to rule the world than does the Roman emperor. The emperor may have the power of life and death, but Jesus has power over death. "My kingdom is not from this world," Jesus says to Pilate. Jesus is the king of a very different kind of kingdom, ruled by peace not force, by love not fear. Soon this king will be fastened to an instrument of execution which will come to be recognised as his throne for ages to come.

Application

There is no emperor ruling our world. There are dictators still, but they are on a rather smaller scale. Our need is not for someone to offer an alternative to the rule of the empire. Our need is for someone to provide security in our chaos.

Is Christ the king? Look around you. Does it seem like it? The world appears to be in the grip of financial, political and natural forces completely beyond our control. Can the world survive? Will it be nuclear war that destroys us? Or global warming? Or the collapse of all our financial systems? Or a flu pandemic? It is difficult to find evidence that Christ really is king of the world.

And yet we say it. Whatever the evidence, whatever we feel, today we say that Christ is king. We assert the truth which is deeper than appearances. We reaffirm the truth that at the heart of the universe is a force for peace and justice and love which is stronger than all human forces, which has been from eternity and will be to the end of time.

It is part of human nature to search for meaning in the chaos of life, and to want there to be a structure and a purpose. We want to know that someone is in charge. Today we remind ourselves that someone is.