

Colossians 1. 11 – 20

Luke 23. 33 – 43

The Feast of Christ the King

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Today we celebrate the reign of Christ our King over all creation. But so soon in our act of thanksgiving, any preconceptions we might've brought with us about what this kingship means, have been punctured by our Gospel reading. We see our King on the cross, tortured, humiliated and put to death.

It may seem a strange way to end the liturgical year, to be reminded of the moment when Our Lord seemed to have no power or authority at all.

But the *new* liturgical year begins in the same way, if we think about it. Advent is a short season of preparation for our celebration of the birth of our King at Christmas.

But what kind of a birth is it? This King's palace will be a dirty stable; his royal robes are swaddling clothes. His courtiers are rough shepherds and farm animals. When he grows up, his crown will be made of thorns. His throne will be a cross. He will be abandoned by almost everyone who follows him.

Why on earth does Christ choose this way to win the allegiance of humanity – people he himself brought into being with God?

There's a story – a parable, really – by the nineteenth-Century philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, called 'The King and the Maiden.' It's a reflection on the Incarnation, and the true nature of Christ's Kingdom. I think I might've talked about it before, but it bears repeating on today's feast.

"Suppose there was a king who loved a humble maiden. The king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power. No one dared breathe a word against him, for he had the strength to crush all opponents.

And yet this mighty king was melted by love for a humble maiden who lived in a poor village in his kingdom. How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his kingliness tied his hands. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels and clothed her body in royal robes, she would surely not resist—no one dared resist him. But would she love him?

She would say she loved him, of course, but would she truly? Or would she live with him in fear, nursing a private grief for the life she had left behind? Would she be happy at his side? How could he know for sure? If he rode to her forest cottage in his royal carriage, with an armed escort waving bright banners, that too would overwhelm her. He did not want a cringing subject. He wanted a lover, an equal. He wanted her to forget that he was a king and

she a humble maiden and to let shared love cross the gulf between them. For it is only in love that the unequal can be made equal.

The king, convinced he could not elevate the maiden without crushing her freedom, resolved to descend to her. Clothed as a beggar, he approached her cottage with a worn cloak fluttering loose about him. This was not just a disguise—the king took on a totally new identity—he had renounced his throne to declare his love and to win hers.”

Christ our King does not come to us as a mighty and terrible conqueror, to demand our obedience: he comes as one “melted by love,” as Kierkegaard put it. One who desires not our submission, but our love, given freely and authentically. One who descends to us in humility, so that he may share with us his glory. “It is only in love that the unequal can be made equal.”

What Kierkegaard expresses in parable form, St Paul writes in his letter to the Colossians, which we heard earlier.

Christ our King is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation,” glorious in power; and any earthly claims to power, “whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers” – all of them are utterly insignificant when compared with him; the one in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”

He could have come as a mighty King to judge with a terrible judgement, sweep away the evildoers and force people to obey him. Indeed, that’s the kind of King that the people expected and perhaps even wanted. Life might be a lot easier, if there was that kind of power in the world; unless, of course, we’re the ones being judged.

But he didn’t do that. The one who is all-powerful submitted willingly to the earthly powers. The one in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,” “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

Instead of showing his power in wrath and punishment, Christ our King, “melted by love,” showed his power in weakness and suffering. In giving everything up, even his very life, so that only love is left: he showed that that love has the power to overcome all that is set against it, even death itself.

“The firstborn of all creation” became “the firstborn from the dead;” and he shares that new and wonderful life with all who follow him in his better, more hopeful way; a way of love, not hate; a kingdom of justice, not inequality.

Not all people want this kind of king. Like those two thieves on the cross, some will work for this hopeful kingdom; but others will scorn it, and seek to perpetuate the earthly power. And next Sunday, as we begin the Church’s year all over again, the great Advent readings and hymns will remind us that there will be a final judgement for both kinds of person.

“Ev’ry eye shall now behold him robed in dreadful majesty; those who set at nought and sold him, pierced and nailed him to the tree, deeply wailing, shall the true Messiah see.”

What account will we give of ourselves when we come before the face of our King; that same bruised and bloodied face that gazed on the world in pain and pity and love from the cross?

We do not need to tremble. When we come to look upon Christ, when we see our King as he really is, seated in glory—we will have no cause to be afraid. Because we have already seen him: we have already come to know him not as a vengeful tyrant, but as one who is “melted by love;” one who comes to meet us again and again, and makes his home within us. And we have already seen the signs of his Kingdom, in all that is good and reflects his love in this broken world.

Our King “did not come to be served, but to serve.” And we serve him best when we can let *ourselves* be melted by love; when we too can put aside all the temptations of earthly wealth and status and power, and can give up everything as he did, so that only love is left. May that be our prayer at the end of this year. Amen.