

We can probably all recall that when we were first introduced to the person of Jesus, we were taught that he was a king. That would be especially true if our earliest Christian memories were in childhood and were largely associated with Christmas, nourished by the nativity play and the popular carols which proclaim the new-born king.

As we grew up, it should have become abundantly clear to us that in his relatively short earthly life, Jesus neither sought nor experienced any of the characteristics of privilege or power that we would associate with royalty or kingship. Even the poetic and largely interpretive infancy stories indicate that his origins were very humble. It is wonderfully illustrated by the story of his birth in a cow shed, with a manger, an animal's feeding trough for a bed. When Jesus grew up, he said on one occasion, 'Foxes have holes and birds have their nests, but the Son of Man (the human one) has nowhere to lay his head.' And the only crown that was ever placed on that head was a crown of thorns made in a painful act of mock homage before he was violently executed in the way used by the Roman Empire for eliminating those who opposed them.

We read today part of the account of Jesus' trial as presented by John. It is a rather more sanitised version than the Passion narratives we read in the other Gospels. We should always read the Gospel of John from the standpoint that we already know who Jesus is. We know him as the Risen Christ. In John, we are always *reading back* and seeing his earthly life and career through the lens of his risen glory. This becomes clear in John's account of his trial before Pontius Pilate. John wants to show Jesus in control, almost running the show. It is as if the uncomprehending Pilate is on trial! Following this scene, the crown of thorns that the soldiers placed on Jesus' head is to John a real coronation. As Jesus is presented to the hostile rent-a-crowd, he is still wearing the purple robe of a king that they put upon him. His crucifixion was to be his greatest sign, his moment of glory! The light of resurrection triumph was already shining through this tragic sequence of events.

The encounter with Pilate informs us that the kingdom of Jesus is not of this world, that is, it does not copy the world's version of kingdoms. It has no boundaries, territories or structures of power. Its citizens are those who listen to the voice of Jesus and follow his way. According to John, Pilate had the opportunity of listening to Jesus and so coming to know 'the truth' – about

God, about God's ways of justice, and what real power is. But Pilate did not get it. I wonder if we really get it!? We hear Jesus regularly, especially reading and reflecting on the words of scripture. We know who he is and what he stands for. How well are we listening to him, and trying to follow him? How well are we living and acting according to his words and values?

Today, we are confronted with the mystery of what Christ's kingship is really all about, what Jesus himself is really all about. Perhaps we can see the Christ event, the mystery of God becoming one of us, as a divine protest, a protest against the corrupted values of the world and its exercise of power and authority. In the coming of Christ we can hear God saying to the world: 'See where I really am; what I am really like, and just how far I am prepared to go in love for you, how far I will go to bring you back to me, bring you back to being people who reflect my image and likeness rather than the shadows and disguises and inadequate expressions of humanity that you have become.'

In Christ directly, after the messages of the prophets before him, God is protesting against human power and arrogance and injustice in a world where such evils had become a normal part of life, even among those who worshipped God. They had somehow managed to turn God into an idol that reflected their own dubious standards, their prejudices and their power structures, just as the institutional Church did to a large extent after being made the official religion of an empire in the 4th century.

The world did not know or failed to understand, and largely still does not, that God's truth is about a world where citizenship is not based on power, or advantage, or racial or tribal or class or gender superiority. It is rather about a world without boundaries that separate people from one another, and where inclusivity, justice, love and peace are normal rather than exceptional. As the message of Jesus shows, these are the only values that will be able to exist when the kingdom of God comes to fulfilment.

It is interesting to study the lives of earthly rulers who became included among the recognised saints of the Church. The hallmark of their lives was faithfulness to God expressed in exemplary service to their people, and by their just rule and the fact that they had no illusions about their earthly power. Where there is a commitment to people rather than power, where there is a

bias to the poor rather than the rich, where there is a policy and practise of service rather than subjection, we may hope to find the ingredients for a much more peaceful, just and much happier world.

We must continue to pray for our earthly leaders and governments that they may rule wisely, justly, and with humility. We support those prayers by endeavouring to be humble, self-giving, and responsible citizens ourselves. On this final Sunday of the Church year, we are being invited to recommit ourselves to the most important citizenship that we have, that is, to the kingdom of God, the kingdom of Jesus Christ, to which all are invited and in which all may one day find a home.

Let us celebrate today what a joy it is to belong to Christ. Let us reaffirm that we wish to live our lives under his loving rule. Let us resolve to continue to work for the growth of his kingdom in our lives and in the world.