

November 24 2024 Rev Don Owers

Christ the King 2024

What would you say if a friend asked you what it means to be Christian? Think about that for a moment.

There are, undoubtedly, quite a few valid ways you could answer that question, but one of the most concise and meaningful answers I've heard came from a 6 year old girl. She said, 'My Grandma says, "You have invite Jesus on to the throne of your heart!"'

Her Grandma was absolutely correct, and God bless her! 'You have to put Jesus on the throne of your heart!'

Today is the Sunday the Church sets apart to celebrate the reign of Christ the King – and it is absolutely true that one vitally important way which his reign is exercised is through the hearts of his followers, and I'm going to reflect more on that a bit later. But the reign of Christ, which we celebrate today, is more than that. Our reading from Revelation reminds us that Jesus, as the crucified and risen king, is sovereign over death and all the nations of the world, he is, St John puts it: ' . . . the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth.'

The problem is that, as we look at our world, we don't see a lot of evidence of Jesus as sovereign over death or as ruling over the unruly nations of the world. In fact, the world seems chaotic and dangerous, and getting worse. If a non-Christian made that point to us, I think we'd have to accept it as undeniable. That doesn't mean, however, that we have nothing to say in response, and I think our Bible readings give us some clues as to how we might reply.

In our reading from John 18 when Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, asks Jesus, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' after a bit of to and fro, Jesus answers, 'My kingdom is not **from** this world, if it was my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over . . .'

I think this must have been very confusing for Pilate, because what he was used to was kingdoms that were established and held together by the exercise of power, especially military power and political power. That was the worldly understanding of a kingdom. But Jesus says, 'My kingdom is not **from** this world . . . 'In other words, his kingdom is different to the kingdoms of the world - and I think he means different in origin and different in character, and different in purpose.

Each of the gospel writers, in his own way, describes Jesus beginning his ministry by announcing that the kingdom of God is at hand. Jewish people in the time of Jesus were hoping that God would intervene in history to establish his rule – or to put that another way, his kingdom - over human society, they were looking for the coming of God's Kingdom. Jesus begins his ministry by announcing that this intervention has happened through him – his mission is to announce and establish the kingdom of God. So, the kingdom of which Jesus speaks to Pilate is a kingdom that has its origin in God, and it draws its character and its purpose from God. Looking back at how God acted in Jesus to inaugurate his kingdom, St John writes, in that most famous of Bible verses, John 3.16:

'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that those who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life.'

The kingdom of which Jesus speaks then, is a kingdom of a different kind. It has its origin in God, and God's plan for humankind, it is characterised by love – by which is meant a sacrificial commitment to the restoration of humanity, its purpose is the salvation of the world and, if we read to the end of the gospels, we find it's established through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Pilate becomes an involuntary prophet by placing on the cross on which Jesus was crucified, an inscription, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews,' and thus unwittingly bears witness that the throne from which Jesus rules is his cross. The cross is the means by which he defeats sin and death, and his resurrection affirms his victory. In ch 1 of his letter to the Romans St Paul declares Jesus:

‘ . . . was confirmed to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord;

Jesus is victorious over sin and death, and he lives and reigns today but his kingdom advances not through the exercise of power, but through the exercise of sacrificial love. It is a kingdom of a different kind.

If we go back to our question, then, and ask, how Jesus reigns today in the chaotic world in which we live, part of the answer is that he reigns wherever people, in his name, commit themselves to oppose sin and despair and conflict and chaos, and seek to bring others to a saving knowledge of Jesus. And Christ’s reign is advancing, people’s lives are being changed, people’s hearts are being transformed, people are gaining direction for today and hope for tomorrow, in the name of Jesus. Every day his kingdom expands, one life at a time. So despite the chaos of the world, Jesus continues to reign!

Our Psalm may also give us a clue as to how to answer questions about the apparent absence of Christ’s reign today. Psalm 93 is what’s known as an enthronement psalm. These were used annually at a ceremony which celebrated God’s rule, not only over God’s people Israel but also over all the world. The thing is, God’s people then, lived in a world that was much more chaotic and dangerous than ours. They were constantly under threat. Their world was a mess! But they came to this annual celebration, like our celebration of Christ the King, where they shout:

The Lord is king; he is robed in majesty;
 the Lord is robed; he is girded with strength.
 He has established the world; it shall never be moved;
 2 your throne is established from of old;
 you are from everlasting.

This is a shout of defiance, a shout of faith. In spite of what’s happening around them, in spite of the chaos in their lives, they declare that the God of Israel, YHWH, reigns. This confidence they have is not a blind faith or wishful thinking. It’s based on the history of God’s dealings with them in the past and their assurance of God’s promise for the

future. They look back to the foundational events their past– the Passover and the Exodus – as well as God’s faithfulness at other times, and their experience of God’s faithfulness gives them confidence to look forward to the promised day when God would reveal his reign to the world. Their defiant message to the world is: ‘God’s reign is real, you may not see it yet, but you will!’

One of the reasons the celebration of Christ the King was introduced by Pope Pius XI in 1925, was as a way of encouraging Christians to strengthen their faith in Christ their king in the face of a world that was rejecting Christ and becoming dominated by secularism. So, a bit like Israel’s enthronement festival, it’s an opportunity for us to affirm and declare that ‘The Lord reigns’ in spite of the chaos around us. We too have history – we look back to the cross and the resurrection, we recognise that Jesus is sovereign over sin and death; we too have the evidence of God’s presence and God’s faithfulness in our lives, and we look forward to the day when Jesus returns, when every tribe and nation will acknowledge his rule. We acknowledge this every Sunday in the creed when we affirm: ‘He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom (his reign) will have no end.’

It’s important that we understand all this, and affirm it. But understanding and affirmation mean nothing if we fail to incorporate the benevolent reign of Jesus into our everyday lives and behaviour. ‘You have to invite Jesus on to the throne of your heart.’ This is another real aspect of Christ’s reign today and it’s not an optional extra. Jesus rules today in the hearts of his people. But this is simply a poetic way of saying that Jesus must be king over our lives. I think we need to be really concrete about this. To have Jesus as our king means that every aspect of our lives must come under his reign. So, we have to ask, for example, how does Jesus, direct our use of the money we have at God’s hand? How does Christ direct how we relate to others or direct the language we use and whether that is pleasing to Christ or not. What has Christ to say about how we think and speak of others? What has Christ to say about the way we use the time God has given to us, and so on. For those who seek to have Christ rule in their hearts, it seems to me that such concrete questions as these must be asked and answered. Sometimes the answer is immediately clear, we know what Jesus would say.

Sometimes though, questions need to be wrestled with, thought about in the light of God's word, prayed over and discussed with other Christians. But brothers and sisters, if we are to be faithful, if we are to know the fullness of God's salvation in our lives and in our relationships, and if we are to be good advertisements for Jesus, we cannot avoid asking 'How would Jesus have me act, what would Jesus have me do?' We have to invite Jesus on to the throne of our hearts.