Christ the King – 2025

Back when I was studying for my Master's degree in theology, I had a very memorable conversation during one evening tutorial. The tutor asked the group, "Does it matter that Jesus was a man?"

Well, being much younger and more hot-headed back then (yes, I know I can still be hot-headed now - so imagine me then!) I piped up, "Yes, of course it matters. He was Jesus, wasn't he? Surely it matters that he was a man!" The tutor looked at me calmly. I'd clearly stepped right into his trap. "Yes, Gareth," he said, "but you're answering as a white, middle-class man in Britain. Try looking at the question from the point of view of a working-class woman in a part of the world where there is no female equality." His reply floored me. It opened my eyes to the fact that the way I see Jesus isn't necessarily the way others see him. Later in the course, when I had to choose a topic for my thesis, that conversation stayed with me. Who is Jesus for us today? And surely the answer had to be found in the gospels.

Here's the interesting thing: if you read the gospels carefully, you'll never find Jesus claiming kingship for himself. Even the well-known verse in John 18:36 "my kingdom is not of this world" can be translated in two ways. It can mean "the kingdom I rule" or "the kingdom I belong to." That raises a good question for us today: what exactly are we celebrating on this feast of Christ the King?

It's worth remembering that dedicating the last Sunday before Advent to Christ the King is actually quite a recent development. It wasn't instituted until 1925—so this year marks its 100th anniversary. Pope Pius XI established the feast to remind Christians that their true allegiance was to Christ, not to earthly rulers, at a time when Benito Mussolini was gaining power in Italy. But here's the preacher's dilemma: how do we avoid slipping into those comforting but slightly empty phrases that sound nice but make little difference to how we actually live? Christ reigning from on high, benignly watching over us. Christ as the ruler to whom we owe allegiance above all else. It all sounds lovely, but what does it *mean* for everyday discipleship? What difference does it make to how we live tomorrow morning?

This is, of course, a huge question. But today's gospel offers a glimpse. The conversation between Jesus and the criminal crucified beside him is, I think, one of the most fascinating in the entire Bible. Notice how simple the criminal's words are. He asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom. He doesn't ask to be rescued. He doesn't ask to be admitted into heaven. He asks only to be remembered. And perhaps this is one of the most human requests imaginable that at the end of our lives, someone would remember us. This man knows the weight of his choices. He knows they have led him to this moment. Maybe he doesn't feel worthy of heaven. Maybe "remember me" is the best he can manage. "When you get there," he's saying, "think of me."

But Jesus responds in a way the man never expects. He doesn't say, "I'll remember you." He says, "You will be with me in Paradise." He offers not remembrance but relationship.

Not distance but welcome. Perhaps *this* is the kingship we're meant to see: Christ the King as the one who offers radical invitation, even to those who barely dare to ask.

Think of who else is there at the crucifixion: the soldiers, the religious leaders mocking him, the onlookers, the women who followed him. Yet it is the criminal, the outcast, the condemned, the man with literally no future, who understands Jesus. He is the only one who sees clearly. And that is a sobering thought for those of us who feel we've got things reasonably together because we come to church. Would we have understood as he did? To my shame, I'm not sure I would.

And so we hear the good news of today.

It's okay if we don't feel worthy. Jesus welcomes us anyway.

It's okay if we don't feel part of the "in crowd". Jesus never showed much interest in them.

It's okay if we don't feel confident enough to ask for heaven. If all we can manage is, "Lord, remember me."

That is what the criminal asked… and he's the one Jesus promises a place in Paradise. This is Christ at his kingly best. Amen.