

I am on holiday for a week from next Saturday, and Angela has very kindly given me the Sundays off at each end of my week. The significance of this for me is that, after today, the next time I am in church in the Benefice we will be very much into Advent, and Christmas will be looming over the horizon at a speed that many of us will not be ready for – sorry, that is probably not going to help anyone's panic levels is it?

Anyway, Advent starts next Sunday which means today is the last Sunday in the church's year, and as such it is the day when we celebrate the feast of Christ the King. I don't know about you but I always assume that these festivals have been in existence since the year dot, but actually this one, in terms of church history, is relatively new. It was first introduced into the Catholic church by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as a festival to honour the kingship of Christ, but they only moved it to its current position on the last Sunday of the church's year in 1970, and it came to be adopted by non-Roman churches, not least the Church of England soon after that – but it was actually only made a mandatory festival in the Church of England with the arrival of Common Worship in the year 2000.

But what a great thing to do, just before we start the story of Jesus' ministry on earth all over again – to celebrate the Kingship of Jesus Christ. As the wonderful catholic writer, the late Henri Nouwen wrote in his last book, 'Sabbatical Journey', "on the last Sunday of the liturgical year, Christ is presented to us as the mocked King on the cross as well as the King of the universe. The greatest humiliation and the greatest victory are both shown to us in today's liturgy. It is important to look at this humiliated and victorious Christ before we start the new liturgical year with the Celebration of Advent. All through the year we have to stay close to the humiliation as well as to the victory of Christ, because we are called to live both in our daily lives."

So, as we prepare ourselves to do just that, let's take a closer look at what was going on in our gospel reading today.

The story so far. After his arrest, Jesus was first taken to the High Priest's father in law, Annas. After a bit of an argument Annas sent Jesus off to Caiaphas, and then Jesus was taken to Pilate.

Interestingly, the high priests could not take Jesus into Pilate's headquarters as that was the home of a non-Jew and by entering it they would risk defilement, they would be seen as unclean, and not be able to eat the feast of the Passover. They were prepared to try and arrange the murder of Jesus, but that apparently didn't seem to matter compared to their partaking in the Passover feast. So Pilate had to go out and bring Jesus into his headquarters – and then we had this conversation about Kingship, and he starts off by asking Jesus a perfectly straight forward question: Are you the King of the Jews? to which Jesus replies, well actually he doesn't really answer the question, but responds with a question of his own. This is a common tactic of Jesus' when being challenged by his opponents. Do you remember when the chief priests and scribes questioned Jesus by asking him, "Tell us by whose authority you are doing these things. Who is it that gave you this authority?" Jesus replied, "I will also ask you a question, and you tell me: Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" Answering a question with a question that the chief priests opted to answer by saying we don't know, allowed Jesus to say, "Neither will I answer your question."

He answers his supporters directly enough – remember, for example, the rich young man who he answered by telling him to sell everything and follow him - but not his opponents. Coming back to his conversation with Pilate, Jesus is fully aware that he has done nothing wrong; nothing that his opponents can crucify him for – the only chance they have is if he says the wrong thing.

So Pilate tries another question. What have you done? And again Jesus pretty much ignores the question, but starts talking about how his kingdom is different from any other kingdom as, "It is not from this world."

I do wonder what Pilate would have made of that statement – indeed I wonder what people today would make of that statement. But, not to be defeated, Pilate tries the, "are you a King?" question once more, and Jesus sidesteps it again – but at the end of his response he says this: "You say that I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." This is how Jesus sums up his Kingship, so it is this that we must understand this morning. "You say that I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

The question we must ask ourselves this morning is, "Am I listening and if I am what am I hearing, and if I am hearing how does that change my life?"

To live under Jesus' kingship has various requirements but they can be met by doing two things: living our lives following the great commandment, and building his church by following the great commission.

Let's remind ourselves about those two greats. First the great commandment. Jesus was asked the question, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" to which he replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

And it was at the end of St Matthew's gospel that we read of Jesus giving the great commission to his disciples when Jesus appeared to the eleven remaining disciples and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

So, can we build a picture of Jesus' kingdom based on the great commandment and the great commission? Yes we can.

How do we live in this Kingdom? The first thing that is clear is that Jesus must be at the centre of everything we do in our lives in this Kingdom – not an afterthought, not just something we consider when we are in church, or when we are in a meeting about church, but all the time. If we have someone who we want to be at the centre of every aspect of our lives, should we not consult them on every decision we need to take, or at least every decision that will have an impact on our lives? I will be the first to put my hand up and admit, "No I don't always do this" but I do always try. It could be a new job; it could be a new role in the church or the community; it could be giving advice to a family member or friend, or perhaps deciding not to give advice. Whatever decision you are trying to make – Jesus wants to help.

And perhaps those decisions will have an impact on our resources – whether they are our time, or our talents, or our treasures. Remember that this church, whichever church you see as your church, is there for a purpose and that is to be God's means to building his Kingdom on this earth – and to do that we need to resource his church. And our church should be the first call on our resources not the last.

What else are we required to do in Jesus' kingdom? We are required to worship God. This is not something we do when we can fit it in to our often busy schedules, but it should be a priority in our lives. And it is the job of those of us called to lead this worship to make it a meaningful time of worship that you will want to come to and God will see that you are genuinely worshipping him.

But perhaps the most important aspect of this Kingdom that we are thinking about is that God wants everyone to be part of this Kingdom – and the only way we are going to get close to that is to take the great commission seriously.

It is not enough for us to come to church and hope that some new people will walk through the door – we are commissioned to go and find them, and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And if that is to happen, we do need to do things differently. That is what the PCCs started to think about at our away afternoon a couple of weeks ago, and it will remain the key item on our PCC agendas.

And every church in the country is being charged to look at themselves and what they do and how they do things. I watched on YouTube this week the opening of the new session of the General Assembly of the Church of England – which is the principal law making body for our church – and it was actually a lot more interesting than it sounds.

The Archbishop of York, in replying to the Queen's message given by the Duke of Wessex, to this inaugural session used a quote from the wonderful lake district walker and author Alfred Wainwright when he said, "There is no such thing as bad weather, only the wrong clothes". He went on to make this comment.

As a church we mustn't complain about the weather saying things are against us in our culture, rather we need to find the right clothes and the right ways of reaching and serving people in the many places that they live.

And that leads me to the last thing I would say about this Kingdom, Jesus' kingdom, that we are looking at – it is and must be an evolving Kingdom – because the land in which it is trying to establish itself is an evolving world. In an evolving kingdom, not everything has to change. There are lots of things about our churches and our worship that are very precious to us, and we really don't want to lose, but if our implementation of Jesus' kingdom is putting people off joining it, then somethings will have to change.

And if all that seems impossible let me remind you of the closing line of the Great Commission, the closing sentences of St Matthew's gospel. "I am with you always, to the end of the age." God calls us to do all sorts of things and to some of those our immediate response will be – what me? You are joking? But don't forget that was also Moses' response to God at the Burning Bush when God called him to lead His people to the promised land, and God gave Moses his brother Aaron to do the things that Moses couldn't. "I am with you always, to the end of the age." So says the King, Christ the King, the King who we celebrate, today.

Amen