

**2018-11-25 ... 6.30pm Evensong ... Revd Canon William Price**  
**Daniel 5; John 6: 1 – 15**

This Sunday has 2 official names, depending on which Prayer Book is used, and also it has, or had, an unofficial, but widely-used name.

So in the Common Worship Prayer Book (which we are not actually using this evening!) **today is the Feast of Christ the King**. The Feast was instituted by Pope Pius IX in 1925, at a time of growing nationalism, fascism, communism, and secularisation, to stress that ultimately the universal King is Jesus Christ. Oddly enough the Pope's initiative occurred at a time when there were fewer earthly kings in Europe than there had been 10 years earlier. Gone were the Kings of Bavaria, Saxony, and Württemberg, and even the King of Montenegro, and gone too were the Emperors of Germany, Russia, and Austro-Hungary, leaving new republics in their place. Pope Pius placed the Feast on the last Sunday of October, the Sunday immediately before All Saints' Day. In 1969 Pope Paul VI moved the Feast of Christ the King to the last Sunday in the Church's year, before the beginning of Advent. For many years the Feast was observed mainly in the Roman Catholic Church, but now it is observed in many other churches, including the Church of England.

Kings are rare creatures these days. I can think of only 5 in Europe – Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Spain. But in the past kings and emperors were found everywhere. The Bible is full of kings. Kings or emperors were seen as the almost universal rulers of countries. Indeed when the American colonies won their independence from Britain, people in Europe was astonished that they were not going to have a king. Only unimportant countries like Switzerland didn't have kings. The world has changed.

We are given two rather odd readings from the Bible for Evensong on this Feast of Christ the King. The first, the **5<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Daniel**, is both an odd choice and a long one, but exciting, in a spine-chilling way. Belshazzar's feast is well-known to some from William Walton's cantata of 1931. Belshazzar had a great feast, during which the gold and silver vessels taken from the temple in Jerusalem, and therefore sacred to the Jews, were used to praise pagan gods. This was for Jews the ultimate blasphemy. Then appeared the writing on the wall – presumably the origin of the popular phrase – which terrified Belshazzar. Knees knocked together was not very kingly, although the King didn't know what the words meant until Daniel gave the chilling interpretation that Belshazzar was going to die and his kingdom was to be divided between the Medes and the Persians. Daniel was promoted to be the third ruler of the kingdom, but that generous act did Belshazzar no good, and that very night he was slain, whether by God or by assassination we don't know.

It's a vivid story, told so dramatically, but why it should have been chosen as the first lesson for the Feast of Christ the King is beyond me, unless it is to compare an impious human ruler with the just and gentle rule of Jesus Christ. And actually the writer, who probably composed this book about 400 years after the events portrayed in it (as someone today might write a story set in Shakespeare's time) made one mistake, which makes the chapter even less appropriate. What I mean is that Belshazzar is called the king many times in the Book of Daniel, but he wasn't actually a king at all. Neither was he the son of Nebuchadnezzar. The real king at the time in which the story was set was called Nabonidus. Nabonidus was, however, not interested in being a king and he spent his later years in the desert following scholarly interests. Belshazzar was in fact a regent, ruling for his father. So Daniel was to be 'the third ruler in the kingdom' after Nabonidus and Belshazzar. And although we are told that Darius the Mede received the kingdom after Belshazzar, who wasn't actually the king, it's also true that whoever Darius was he wasn't a Mede, and he didn't succeed Belshazzar. The next king was actually Cyrus the Persian. The history is all at sea, but Belshazzar's feast is a jolly exciting story, a warning to earthly rulers that God rules over all.

The second lesson also strikes me as an odd choice, although I can see more point in its being chosen than I can for the first lesson. We heard how Jesus fed 5,000 people from 5 barley loaves and 2 fish, and the left overs filled 12 baskets. There's a lot to be said about this miracle, but not this evening, when I just want to remind you of what happened afterwards. The crowd were impressed at what Jesus had done, as we would have been if we had been there, and Jesus realised that they were about to force him to become their king. So he withdrew to the mountain by himself to avoid them. The message of this reading is that Jesus refused to become an earthly king. As he said to Pontius Pilate at his trial: **'My kingdom is not from this world'**.

**PTO**

No, his kingdom is an everlasting kingdom. His kingdom is not a geographic kingdom. As we travel we won't see a road sign saying 'Welcome to the Kingdom of Jesus. Please drive carefully'. Jesus is Lord of all, even though all do not acknowledge him. But for us, his followers and friends, he is our King, to be worshipped, trusted and adored, and to rule over our lives. He is Christ our King, and his kingdom is wherever people treat each other with love and respect, where the good prevails over the bad, light prevails over darkness, and life prevails over death.

I mentioned at the beginning that there are two official names for this Sunday. One is Christ the King, and the other, older, name is the Sunday next before Advent, or even, this year, the 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity Sunday. It reminds us that next Sunday we begin another new year in the life of the Church, a reminder of how time marches on, whether we like it or not.

And the third, the popular, name for this Sunday is, or was, **Stir Up Sunday**, from the opening words of the collect of the day in the Book of Common Prayer (and the post-communion prayer in Common Worship). This came of course from the custom of making Christmas puddings on this day, stirring the mixture well. It's also an opportunity to stir up our spiritual lives, a chance to reflect on our Christian profession to see whether we have become slack or half-hearted in our worship and witness. It's a chance to stir ourselves up, and I speak to myself as well as to you. It's an opportunity to stir ourselves up as we seek to follow Christ our King, who exemplified in his life on earth the concept of the Servant King, the King who served others, especially the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized.

May we stir ourselves up to be faithful to Christ our King, to know him more clearly, to love him more dearly, and to follow him more nearly day by day, the Jesus who is above all power and all majesty.

To him be the glory and the love for time and for eternity.