



The Feast of Christ the King

Diocesan Service: 21st November 2021

In 2016, the UK and the Commonwealth celebrated the 90th birthday of Her Majesty the Queen. There were street parties, special services and a memorable fleet of boats of all shapes and sizes that accompanied the royal barge up the Thames – in appalling weather, as I recall.

One of the lasting tributes of that celebration was the publication of a book entitled, 'The Servant Queen and the King She Serves.' Alongside the inevitable photos of her life and her work as a Monarch, it used the Queen's own words to describe her Christian faith and the part it has played in her exercising of the role into which she was born. The title of the book encapsulates her approach; one of duty and service, inspired by the one who, 'although he was in the form of God', nevertheless 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.' (Philippians 2:6-8)

At her coronation, the Queen like every other British Monarch since Charles the second, was given the Orb: a spherical golden globe mounted by precious jewels on the top of which is a cross, a symbol of Godly power, representing Christ's dominion over the world. It's a reminder to the monarch as well as to their subjects that whatever power they have at home and across the world, there is a greater authority than even they. Christ, the servant King, whose throne is the cross.

It is this King that we gather to worship today; a king who was born in the humblest of circumstances, whose life of demonstrated God's self-giving love for the world and who ended his days on earth as a criminal nailed to a cross is the same king who now reigns supreme over the whole created order. His life and death reveal the way in which God redeems the world; the way that we're invited to inhabit. Not because that will get us into heaven. Not because

reigning with Christ in glory is a reward for good behaviour. But because humility, love and service is the only means by which we can enter into the glory that is Christ. We see it, find it and understand it by no other way than patterning our lives on the life of Jesus, our servant King.

It's why the little people, the nobodies, the marginalized tend to get it more easily than the rest of us. For they have nothing to lose and are, therefore, more aware of their need of God and their dependence on others. Those of us with a degree of power and authority, perhaps even of status, have to work hard to let go and learn to rely totally on God. It's as true in the Church as it is in any other organization.

It's said that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The best way to ensure that we're not corrupted by it is to give it away, to share it with others and to empower those around us in a way that holds each of us to accountable to one another. Most people would be surprised at the thought that they have any power at all. But human nature can be very manipulative and we all find ways of trying to get what we want or of maintaining our position over and against others. Even the youngest of children have ways of trying to call the shots.

Today, Christ our King calls us to worship him and him above all else, not least because that keeps him and us in our proper place.

He also calls us to work with him in establishing his kingdom here on earth. Again, as our gospel reading reminds us, it's a kingdom where those who wish to be part of it are called to die, like a seed placed into the ground: to die to themselves in order that they might discover the new life that Christ our King offers. It's a kingdom whose foundations are love and compassion and selflessness, as that wonderful parable of the sheep and the goats describes at the end of the gospel according to St Matthew. The ones who inherit the kingdom are the ones who don't put themselves and their own needs first, but offer food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, visit the sick and those in prison, welcome the stranger and give clothes to those without.

It sounds easy and obvious. But Thomas Merton, in his book *The Power and Meaning of Love*, makes an important observation. He writes (and I quote), 'Genuine love cannot be taken for granted. We Christians, however, seem to do. We seem to feel that 'we love one another' and that we know very well what love is. We tend to act as if things were so regulated by love in our

household (our church) that we could safely forget about it and go out to preach to others. Hence, we are not worried about love so much as doctrine. At all costs we want to get everyone to agree with us and to accept our beliefs.' (End quote)

This, of course, is also as true within our church family as it is in the way we're tempted to view others outside of the church. Merton goes on to conclude that in focusing on beliefs, doctrines and religious practices, or indeed on our own survival, rather than on loving one another, we miss the point completely and our witness is compromised. We're not called to preach a particular doctrine, however right we might think it to be. We're not here to lead a movement or recruit for an organization, even when, as now, the future of the church feels vulnerable. We're called to love one another and to preach Christ, the one who is servant and king of all. Because in Christ and in Christ alone, we and all humanity find redemption, love and mercy. Hope and meaning and purpose. Life in all its fulness. Joy beyond measure. For every person in the villages, towns and cities of our diocese and beyond.

May God bless us and guide us, strengthen and inspire us as we pattern our life together as the diocese of Monmouth on that of Christ, our servant king.