

Christ The King

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[0 : 00] Let us pray. Lord, open our minds that we might perceive wonderful things from your word, and give us strength to apply these things in our daily lives. Amen.

I'm glad to be here with you today for both the Chinese-speaking congregation at 130, and also for this congregation, with both a baptism and confirmations.

Today is a special day in the life of some of your parishioners. It's also called Christ the King in the church calendar. It's the last Sunday of the church's year before we begin Advent Sunday next week, leading up to Christmas.

When I was a small child, we didn't have very much money, and a book was a rare gift to be treasured. I've kept a couple of them that were particularly precious. When I was just starting kindergarten, a beautiful lady with a gold tiara and a blue sash in faraway England became the new queen when her father died.

Now, that dates me, and there's many of you that weren't around when that happened. Our parents and teachers told us that this meant we had a new queen in Australia too. She had two little children, just a little bit younger than my brother and myself, a real prince and princess.

[1 : 27] One of my books, which I still have, but I can't find at the moment, was a pop-up picture book about the queen riding in her golden carriage from Buckingham Palace to Westminster Abbey, and having her coronation service where she would be anointed and crowned and receive special robes, a scepter and an orb with a cross, reminding her that Jesus Christ is the king of the world.

This fascinating book enabled us, with the pictures in the Women's Weekly and the newsreels that came out a couple of weeks later, to enter into the excitement of the crowning of Elizabeth II as the new queen of the British Commonwealth.

It was well before television came to Australia. It had come to England. In a special program shown just a few weeks ago on ABC television, Prince Charles was celebrating the queen's Diamond Jubilee, 60 years, and showed pictures of himself as a little boy taking part in that ceremony.

The second book came out a year or so later, when the young queen and Prince Philip were coming to Australia by boat. Billy, a young lad with a lame leg, and Stevie, the steam engine, dreamt that they could meet the queen when she came to visit.

And indeed, in the book, she does this, coming to the mining town of Kalgoorlie in Western Australia, and going on the narrow gauge railway to Billy's school. Here they meet an ordinary gracious lady, dressed in a pretty frock, and not someone sitting all the time on a throne with a crown on her head.

[3 : 07] This story helped me to understand, as a little girl, that being a queen meant various things. We've seen since then the changing role of the monarch in Great Britain and in Australia, and the first referendum about being a republic.

Last year, we had Prince Charles, now in his 60s, visiting Australia as part of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations. She's certainly seen changes in her long reign, from the end of the British Empire, when a large part of our map was coloured pink, to the British Commonwealth, and to some of those countries becoming independent.

I don't want to focus on that aspect of our world, but to look instead for a few minutes at the biblical understanding of Christ the King, and especially the Gospel reading we heard from Luke, chapter 23.

The understanding of Christ as King was not the usual understanding of a king or a prince or an overlord in Jesus' day.

Remember King Herod. Jesus didn't talk about the reign of Christ in a palace with many servants or officials and soldiers carrying out the will of the monarch.

[4 : 25] Instead, Jesus told a parable about the sheep and the goats, about judgment, obedience, and practical love. He also spoke about servant leadership and drew a child to himself, saying that his followers should act in a simple manner, like this child.

Then, on what is now known as Palm Sunday, Jesus entered Jerusalem, not escorted like royalty by a band of soldiers, and riding in a chariot or on a horse, but sitting on a lowly donkey.

Jesus did this in fulfillment of a prophecy that had been spoken years before by Zechariah. The garments of his disciples served as a saddle for him, and the garments of the pilgrims gathering for the Passover in Jerusalem joined the branches of palm and other trees to be a carpet along the way for him.

And so Jesus entered the holy city, bustling with people and the anticipation of the Passover, and he moved towards the temple.

At long last, he had the opportunity, in front of a packed crowd, to exert his authority and to take leadership. The crowd welcomed and acknowledged him as the son of David, as they called out, using the words of the processional psalm number 118.

[5 : 52] This includes the words, Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Then, when others heard the commotion and came asking who this person was, they acknowledged him as Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.

Mark's gospel records Jesus' return the next day and his cleansing of the temple. And then we're left wondering what had happened and what was to happen.

And so each year on Palm Sunday, we remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. And we have the joy and the excitement of the Hosannas, and sometimes a palm procession in some churches, together with the reality of the cross that lies ahead, as many churches then distribute the palm crosses, a reminder to us of the sovereignty of Christ that is to be revealed fully in his willingness to die on the cross for us.

Then, at the other end of Holy Week, on Good Friday, we remember our reading for today from Luke, where Christ was hung up on a cross, with the soldiers and the leaders of the Jews taunting him, while the crowd stood by silently watching.

A great change from the previous Sunday's joyful crowd. Luke tells the story here of Jesus' crucifixion and mentions the mocking yet true sign hanging up above Jesus.

[7 : 30] This is the King of the Jews. This is not the King that was visualised by the crowd, the Jews, or the Romans.

The soldiers mocked him and said what others were probably thinking as well. If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself. Jesus was indeed into saving people, but not himself.

He realised that the way to the salvation of others was through his voluntarily giving up himself on the cross. He was the sovereign Lord, but was exercising his sovereignty in a very different way to other people's understanding of being King.

We see an example of Jesus being the sovereign Lord as he asks God the Father to forgive the people who have just crucified him. He shows here a special power and authority and relationship with God in this utterance.

Jesus then interacts with the thieves on the crosses beside him. One of them mocked him, but the other one could see that Jesus had done nothing wrong and asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom.

[8 : 53] He could see that Jesus was indeed a person from God and his kingdom and authority was not of this world. Jesus, even as he hung there, gasping for breath, responded, Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.

Jesus showed in the way he lived and died and rose again from the dead that he was indeed Christ the King.

So where do we stand between the joyful acknowledgement of Christ as King on Palm Sunday and Jesus hanging on the cross on Good Friday?

How do we respond to these two extremes? How do we see Christ as King? Jesus' reply acknowledges that he does have a kingdom, but not like that of an ordinary king or queen.

This would mean having a group of soldiers fighting on his behalf and protecting him. He's not a king like this. Instead, his kingdom is not of this world.

[10 : 05] It's very different and it comes from God himself. Jesus knew what people expected as a king. Many wanted something out of Star Wars, like that great final battle between Luke Skywalker and the dark side, someone to lead them to victory.

Jesus did have the last victory, but it was one that turned the expectations of the kingdom and kingship upside down. Jesus went out as the servant to suffer and to die, and the forces of evil thought they'd won.

The battle was fought and good was apparently lost because Jesus died on the cross. Lightning flashed, the veil of the temple was torn in two, and quiet fell on all the earth.

A few days later, people met the risen Christ and began to understand for the first time what Jesus had been speaking about. He had promised that the temple would be raised again in three days, and it was.

Here he was. Jesus, in his suffering, proved his kingship and was able to come in power to receive the kingdom from the ancient of days.

[11 : 22] The rather mysterious book of Revelation with its picture images captures something of the wonder and the glory of Christ the King for us, as it describes how Jesus, in his ascension, was enthroned for all time as the King of kings and the Lord of lords, the Alpha and the Omega, which means the A and the Z, the beginning and the end.

He was part of a new order of creation. Victorious over death. These words, and the wonder and the mystery they evoke, are taken up by Handel in his oratorio, and especially in the Hallelujah Chorus, which at my girls' school, we all had to sing, 1,000 of us, every year at speech day.

Didn't matter what your voice was, you sang a certain part, depending on the year you were. So I know this one fairly well. King of kings and Lord of lords, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, for he shall reign forever and ever.

Hallelujah. These are great shouts of triumph and joy and acknowledgement of Christ as King. Do we acknowledge Christ as King in our own lives?

Do we give him the honour and praise due to him as the Son of God? When slumped dying on the cross, Jesus did not look like a king, but he was not defeated.

[12 : 53] He himself defeated the powers of sin and death. As we sing shortly the song, The Servant King, we have a new image of kingship for us to follow.

Jesus who came to serve his Father God and to serve us, encouraging us in turn to reach out in humility to others and to share the love of God with other people in our words and in our actions.

So as we come to the end of this liturgical year and prepare to begin again the journey towards the coming of Christ, his first coming at Christmas and his promised return, let us also remember Easter time and the life and work of Christ.

As those being sponsors for baptism and those being confirmed stood up and proclaimed their belief in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, may you be encouraged to follow Jesus as your Servant King and to put Jesus first in all of the decisions of your life, whether choosing the subjects to study at school, the career you want to undertake, the person to share your life with, or the values that are important to you.

For others, whether regular members or visitors here to share in the baptism and confirmation with your friends and relatives, as your new vestry is commissioned, as you begin preparations in this church and in your own lives for the end of the year and for celebrating Christmas, as you prepare for whatever lies ahead for you as an individual and as a church next year, may you give thanks that Jesus can indeed be your Lord and your King.

[14 : 48] If he's not central in your life now, do ask your friends or the clergy or one of the leaders how to learn more about this amazing person who shows us the love of God and enables us in turn to be in the right relationship with God and to have God in the center of our lives.

In this way, we can all belong to Christ and to his church and stand up and be counted, as you have just done, as followers of Christ, sharing the love of God with others.

Today is also known in church circles as Stir Up Sunday. This comes from the collect, which is often used on this day, beginning with the words, Stir Up, O Lord.

It's also been used traditionally on a Sunday, as this Sunday, for stirring up the ingredients for the Christmas cake and the pudding. But don't panic, as it's not too late to make them yet if you haven't bought the ingredients.

I'd like to close with this collect or special prayer as we remember that we are the people of God, belonging to Christ and his church and acknowledging Christ as our Lord and Saviour and King, with his power and strength, not ours, enabling us to be victorious.

[16 : 17] Let us pray. Stir up, we pray you, O Lord, the wills of your faithful people, that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may by you be plenteously rewarded, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Amen. Amen.