HOMILY FOR CHRIST THE KING YEAR A

26 NOVEMBER 2017 ST BENET’S HALL

It has to be said that kingship in the Bible does not get a particularly good write up, in particular not the exercise of earthly kingship even Israelite kingship. So in a key passage, not chosen for today’s readings, in I Samuel chapter 8 the request of the people of Israel to Samuel for a king is condemned as a rejection of the kingship of God and as an opening of the people to the risk of horrible exploitation by greedy and rapacious rulers. Still the wish of the people prevailed upon Samuel and indeed upon God, though the history of the kingship, as the historical books of the Old Testament repeatedly make clear, was dominated by just such tyranny and rejection of God. It is on balance a rather dismal history and the history of sacral kingship in the Christian church, albeit with exceptions, has not been much of an improvement.

So the question posed by today’s celebration, by today’s readings, is what kind of rule is exercised by Christ the King and what implication is there in this for his followers?

Ezekiel in the first reading pictures a rule of care for others. God wills to tend his people as a shepherd cares for, gathers and nurtures his flock. And in the last line of the reading is there a foreshadowing of the separation of sheep and goats in the gospel. In the shepherd psalm, again there is care and nurture, as well as protection. Here too there is a hint that the care extends beyond the frame of this life to another salvation as in the later sacramental reading of this psalm by the Church the waters become those of baptism, the oil is anointing and the banquet the Eucharist.

The salvation and royal theme then becomes explicit in the second reading, the extract from St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Christ is the king, the first fruits of the dead in his resurrection from the tomb, the second Adam, freeing us from the subjection brought down upon us by the first Adam. And here we begin to see the complexity in this kingly image. Because Christ is the king who in fact puts an end to all sovereignty, authority and power. He is king until he puts all his enemies under his feet, and the nature of these enemies is revealed by the following phrase: the last of these enemies is death. And then once all is subjected he in turn is subjected to God who is all in all. This may seem to be at odds with the statement in the creed ‘his kingdom is without end’, but the Creed must be read in terms of this passage. It is precisely that power which does away with all sovereignty, authority and *power*, which is the kingship of Christ and which has no end. It may seem that we are describing Christ only ironically as king; he redefines all kingship.

The implication of this is spelt out in the Gospel in unmistakeable and memorable terms. The subjects of Christ the King, who receive his salvation and enter his kingdom are those, the sheep not the goats, who recognise that he is in those who need the care of their love. Christ the King is not in those who exercise power for their own benefit, but in the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, those sick and in prison. How could it be otherwise for a king who does away with every sovereignty, authority and power?

And too with this reading we reach the dramatic finale of our year A readings from Matthew. He has been telling us to wear our wedding garment at all times, to have our lamps ready with oil, to do our day’s work in the vineyard and he has reminded us that these are all images for the love God asks us to show to him and to neighbour, to him through neighbour.

What is the nature of this love? Not a self-gratifying emotion, but in fact something which will be much more satisfying, not a tyranny over the strong, but a humble and needed service of the weak by those who know they are weak themselves and have in them only the strength of the one who was weak upon the cross and a humble and needed service by those ready to be surprised: ‘When Lord did we see you?’ We are not necessarily now given the gratification of spiritual satisfaction. It does not feel like salvation, like kingship. It tastes like rather papery bread.

Food for the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, a welcome to the stranger, a visit to the sick and the imprisoned. There is always a material help of others, which is not beyond our reach. To these the church has added burying the dead and in a parallel table spiritual works of mercy, perhaps even more the vocation in such a place as this: teaching, giving advice and spiritual guidance, correcting strays, bearing patiently with those who wrong us, forgiving offences, comforting the afflicted, praying for the living and the dead. All of this is put as preaching, as command, but it is as much description, this court ceremonial of Christ the King. It is what will be as he works within us, always the hidden one, a strange king indeed.