

BISHOP DAVID HAMID'S SERMON
FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING, EUCHARIST WITH CONFIRMATION
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Christ the King B, 2012 – Hamburg with Confirmations

Dan 7.9-10; 13-14; Ps 93; Rev 1.4b-8; John 18.33b-37

Just one year before this Church was founded the authorised translation of the Bible, sometimes known as the King James Version, was published. If you have a copy of the Authorised Version take a look at the amazing piece of prose in the preface. I used to read it when I was a choir boy during the boring parts of the service. When you read it you get a vivid sense of what being a King was all about in those days when this parish was founded – back in 1611-12. Here are some words from it: “To the most high and mighty prince, James, by the Grace of God, King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, Defender of the faith, etc. Great and manifold were the blessings, most dread Sovereign, which Almighty God, the Father of all mercies, bestowed upon us the people of England, when first he sent Your Majesty's Royal Person to rule and reign over us.” This sort of language goes on for a couple of pages, praising King James for being such a great and wonderful monarch. At one point he is even compared to the sun! Those were the glory days for kings and monarchs.

That kind of king language is problematic today 401 years on. Now there is a widespread suspicion of hierarchy of any kind. The feminist movement has made us wary, and quite rightly too, of anything that smacks of patriarchy or male dominance. (Of course the Church of England is still catching up to this message, as we know from the vote on women bishops last week!) But the Church where I was ordained, the Anglican Church of Canada, is a very sensitive Church to this issue of patriarchy and male dominance, and it has renamed today's feast, not Christ the King, but “The Reign of Christ” to avoid using the masculine and hierarchical and patriarchal term “King”.

In celebrating a King, even a divine King in our Church calendar, we have yet another problem. Today the values associated with the glory days of monarchs are less important to many. Nowadays we value our freedom as citizens, not subjects. We value being beholden to none, being autonomous. Duty, obedience, service, loyalty and honour to those in authority are not values that are implanted within us the way they were to those who founded this parish, for instance. Today the most common value which we see in the society around us tends to have to do with individualism – being my own master, not acknowledging any other!

So it sounds a little strange when we encounter the readings for this Feast of Christ the King, for they speak of kings and kingdoms in quite traditional ways. The prophet Daniel says the King receives dominion and glory. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. It is the same sort of sentiment in the preface to the Authorised Version of the Bible. The Psalm also speaks of regal majesty, one can imagine the court of James 1: The king has put on splendid apparel and girded himself with strength. And the Book of Revelation portrays the ruler as the all powerful one who comes down from the clouds, who is “the Alpha and the Omega, the One who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

These images are filled with pageantry associated with monarchy: splendour, power, authority. One of the chief symbols of the British monarchy is the lion. Other monarchs chose other majestic beasts. The Holy Roman Emperor had the eagle – a double headed one, which continued as you Hamburgers will know to be used in this city when it was a state within the German Confederation.

But then we come to the Gospel. All our images of kingliness are reversed. This Jesus is a very strange sort of king. His kingdom is not of this world, he says. His followers are united by truth, not by fear, awe and submission. We know that this king is also a servant, who washed his disciples feet. This king is not invincible in a castle. We find him here, vulnerable and on trial. He has no armies or territories. The symbol of this king is not a lion but a lamb! The lamb of God.

Many of our most ancient Churches in Europe have mosaics of the majestic Christ, enthroned in glory. Yet at the same time in those ancient buildings we find mosaics of Jesus as the good shepherd, caring for his sheep. Jesus as king and as shepherd are side by side in our tradition. There is a hymn which many of us will know which begins, "The king of love my shepherd is". We Christians celebrate Jesus as our King on this feast day, but at the same time we balance this with Jesus as our shepherd. This is because this is no ordinary sort of king of the sort that people have known and feared throughout history. This is a different sort of king. Christ our King has always been a challenging contradiction.

When you travel around Europe you see many remnants of past kingdoms, or the vestiges of present ones: Castles and fortresses. There are lands that we know were once Royal domains. There are duchies and principalities. These were kingdoms which were rooted on the land and on the earth. But Jesus says that his kingdom is not a patch of land on this earth. So what is this kingdom over which our Lord Reigns and which we celebrate today?

When Jesus says his kingdom is not of this world he does not mean that his kingdom is somewhere up in heaven. He is saying that soil and river, castle and defences do not limit his kingdom. It is not a defined territory which produces riches and from whose people armies can be raised. The kingship of Christ is universal, *unbounded*. Jesus is saying that unlike earthly kingdoms which come and go, his is *eternal*. Jesus is saying that unlike kingdoms of this world which are sustained by power, military or economic, the kingship of Christ is sustained by the power of *truth*.

This kingdom is not territorial, but relational. Its borders are defined by our relationship to Christ, and to each other. This kingdom is present wherever people love one another or share one another's burdens, or work to build up a just and peaceful community; whenever people are humble of heart and open to God and serving their neighbour. Whether we are in the kingdom is not determined by being in the territory of the monarch. It is determined by our response to our neighbour's need. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming a stranger, caring for the sick.

For this reason I ask the questions of those to be baptised, confirmed and received today. They are stating their commitment to serve our King and be builders of his Kingdom – will you seek and serve Christ in all people loving your neighbour as yourself. Will you defend the weak and seek peace and justice. It is in this self-giving, this loving service to our neighbour that the kingdom is built, strengthened and extended. When we give ourselves in love, we are transformed, and the world is transformed – we become a kingdom, not of territory, but the New Testament calls us a kingdom of priests serving God and serving his mission to love the world.

Jesus has established a way of life for us that is radically different from the way of the world. The world is fascinated with royalty. The world is fascinated by privilege, status, and power. The world is attracted to possessions, riches and wealth. But what are the privileges of our kingdom? Not special invitations to royal receptions in palaces. The privilege is to be one of God's sons and daughters and to have every other person as a brother or sister. God gives us the privilege of a permanent place around the banquet table of the kingdom.

The power of Jesus' kingdom has nothing to do with the power to defeat opponents, or power to dictate what we would like. He gives us the power of the Holy Spirit. And the riches of his kingdom have nothing to do with art collections, palaces, crown jewels, and bank accounts. But the riches are a relationship with him and the never failing love which is for us at every moment in our lives, no matter what we do - a priceless possession.

Dear friends, this has been a marvellous year of celebration for St Thomas' Church – 400 years of life and ministry. Remember that our purpose as a Church is point to this kingdom; to witness to this kingdom; to embody the values of this kingdom. We are the first fruits – the place where the new

relationships which mark Christ's kingdom are shown as a sign and beacon for the world. The real surprise of this feast of Christ the King is that you and I are God's kingdom already. This is a celebration about us.

In her book *Out of Africa* the Danish author Isak Dinesen, tells the story of a young Kikuyu man who worked for her on her farm for three months. Suddenly he announced that he was leaving her to go to work for a Muslim man nearby. Dinesen was surprised and asked him if he was unhappy working for her. He told her that all was well, but that he had decided to work for a Christian for 3 months to study the way of Christians and then work for a Muslim for 3 months to study their ways, and after experiencing both he was going to decide whether to become a Christian or a Muslim. Dinesen was quite stunned by this. She wrote in her book that she thought back over those past 3 months to see how she had acted! Mahatma Gandhi once remarked that the only thing that kept him from becoming a Christian was Christians! People of St Thomas's as you enter the next century of life as a Church here is a test: would a person coming here for 3 months be persuaded of the way of Christ? Would they see the signs of the kingdom here?

May Christ's kingdom rule in our hearts and may the values of his kingdom be evident in our actions, and in our life as a community so that the world will recognize who is their one and true sovereign, Jesus, to whom be glory and power forever and ever. Amen.

