**CHRIST THE UNIVERSAL KING**

**Sunday 20th November 2022**

**First Reading 2 Samuel 5:1-3**

Anointing with oil has been used from pre-history for social, medicinal and cultic reasons. David had already been anointed king of Judah by his own tribe at Hebron (2 Samuel 2:4). In today's reading we hear how the northern tribes ('all the tribes of Israel') additionally acknowledged him as their king. David was now king of the united kingdoms of Judah and Israel, God's anointed representative in ruling his chosen people. The term 'Anointed One' (Hebrew Messiah & Greek Christ) became in time a technical term for the anticipated liberator of the people.

The Israelites had expected from David and his successors a form of government that would implement the divine will, but the kings they got did not meet their expectations. Consequently, the idea grew that a future liberator of the people, while being a human and Davidic figure, would arrive from heaven (i.e. the Son of Man).

His disciples saw Jesus as fulfilling this expectation but not quite in the way historic Judaism had imagined. He was not a firebrand liberator of his people but the one who was anointed (made Christos) only after he had given himself up to death on a cross (Philippians 2:5-11).

David had always been regarded as the ideal king, though seen perhaps through rose-tinted spectacles when compared to his successors. When the messianic hope developed, it was natural that the Messiah should be thought of as a Son of David. He would be not only a descendant of David but also the type of king that David had been.

(Interesting point is that Matthew makes explicit the acknowledgment that Joseph accepts of Jesus being the son of David despite not being the father himself! See Advent 4 notes and Matthew 1:16)

There are two attitudes toward kingship in the Old Testament. One, representing the principles of David’s court, pictures the king as representing Yahweh’s presence among his people. To-day’s passage from 2 Samuel is of this line of thinking. It stresses the humane sides of kingship—the solidarity of the king with his people ("We are your bone and flesh") and the king as shepherd. These traits were taken up on a higher level in the Christology and ecclesiology of the New Testament. Christ is one with his body the Church, and he is the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep. He knows his sheep by name. He is the flawless representative of a perfect God.

But there is another attitude towards Kingship in the Old Testament. It is a short step from representing God to replacing God. Misuse of power can easily degenerate into tyranny. Chapter 8 of 1 Samuel is the classical expression of this view.

The first attitude is expressed in the English Coronation liturgy, the second in the American Constitution, with its cautionary checks and balances, a result of their experience of George III. The tension between these two views is also seen in the New Testament. In Romans 13;1-7 the state enforces the will of God. This, naturally before the persecutions started, whereas later on in Revelation 13 the state has become the beast from the abyss.

**Responsorial Psalm: 122:1-5**

The pilgrims sang this psalm as they went up to Jerusalem for the festivals. The first part expresses the pilgrims' excitement as they arrive within the sacred precincts. They rejoice in the unity that Jerusalem symbolizes as the crowds, representing all the tribes, flow together to the temple of Yahweh.

In some strands of post-exilic Judaism, it became part of the eschatological hope to envisage a day when the nations would flow together to Jerusalem (see Isaiah 25:6). The New Testament sees this hope partially fulfilled in the admission of the Gentiles into the Church, and to be completely realized in the final return of Christ.

See especially Romans Chapters 9 to 11, where Paul develops the thought that in bringing the collection from the Gentile churches to Jerusalem he is symbolizing the partial fulfilment of this hope. He concludes that his mission will contribute decisively to the final fulfilment, when the number of the Gentiles will be complete and the remains of Israel admitted. (Romans 11:25-26).

**Reading II: Colossians 1:12-20**

Verses 15-20 form one of the great Christological hymns of the New Testament, comparable to Philippians 2:6-11 and John 1:1-14.

Paul wrote Colossians from prison in Rome about 60 A.D. and our passage was possibly a baptismal hymn that he inserted. In any case, it does show mature reflection on the nature of Christ in the world. It has a cosmic sweep. It is explicit about his pre-existence which is derived from the idea of wisdom as it had been developed amongst Jews living in a Greek thinking world. The first half of the hymn (9 lines in the Missal) covers his agency in creation and preservation.

The second part of the hymn (11 lines in the Missal from verses 18 - 20), speaks about his redeeming work on earth. In order, this work refers to the divine nature of the Church, his pre-existence, resurrection, incarnation and atoning work.

It was a bold step to identify an obscure peasant from an unknown village as the Incarnation of the Divine wisdom particularly within one generation of the eyewitnesses. It also seems at first sight a far cry from the Lord’s uncomplicated message of the dawn of God's kingdom.

What has this to do with the kingdom of God? Paul’s introduction to the hymn (2nd paragraph in the Missal) gives the answer. It is precisely the acts of God in Christ celebrated in the hymn that have transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son.

'He is the head of the body, the Church.'

The DNA of the Church is multi-stranded (as a Vine, a Flock, a Temple etc.) but all essentially express the continuation of the people of God from Judaism. As the Jewish people were a visible society with ceremonies and authority, so in the same image was the replacement. It was in the moment of his conversion (Acts of the Apostles 9;4-6) that Paul was struck by this truth of the Christian community being the Body of Christ one earth.

The gradual development in Paul’s mind of this theme can be traced through Galatians 2:26-29; 1 Corinthians 6:13-17; 10:14-21; 12:12-27; Romans 12:5 and here in Colossians it reaches its climax.

**Gospel: Luke 23:35-43**

This is the feast of Christ, the Universal King. It is both the climax of the old year and the Eve of the new. Kingship is the rule of a Monarch over his subjects and our first reading was of King David’s coronation and the second a magnificent eulogy of King Jesus. Now, to complete it, the Gospel gives us the Crucifixion. To say that there appears a disconnect may be thought an understatement.

It was the Roman custom to write the crimes of a crucified man over his head as a deterrent, and the public would see justice being done. In the case of Jesus, his label read The King of the Jews. It takes a determined effort of the will to appreciate that the New Testament presents the Crucifixion of Jesus as a victory.

We would expect such an incident to be reported in extreme language but the language of the Gospels is understated. Crucifixion and violence and death and injustice were frequent events and the Evangelists are simply being factual.

The situation may be illustrated by the opening sentence in the reading, which says, *The people stayed there before the cross, watching Jesus.* It then mentions three groups present in the crowd. The Jewish leaders who jeered, the Roman soldiers who mocked and one of the thieves who abused him. All were hostile.

Then the first supporter is mentioned. The first member of the Kingdom to speak out is an anonymous criminal and the second is the Roman centurion who crucified them both. This does no more than continue the running theme throughout Jesus’ ministry, in that those who appreciated him were the unlikely and the unimportant.

His teaching, as well, was shot through with values that reversed the ones the world took for granted. From the Beatitudes (Luke 6;20-23) to the conversation with Nicodemus, (John 3) he flummoxed the leading thinkers of his day but made sense to the simple-minded.

It was because he broke the mould that he was rejected by most of his own people. Still to-day Jesus does not come in the ways we expect. He does not come at the times we think he should. He answers prayer but often not by granting the things we ask for.

The Gospel reading for to-day is not that of the ascended Christ which we might have expected, but of the crucified one. On both occasions he is, as John says, lifted up from the earth. In a mysterious sense, both Crucifixion and Ascension are aspects of the same truth. To our human experience he is a strange and unconventional king.

When we call him a Universal King, we do not mean that everyone accepts him but that those who do so are drawn from every corner of the earth. It is no accident that at the end of his life on earth, the thief is Jewish and the Centurion a Gentile. It is not without significance that at his birth the Magi were Gentiles and the Shepherds Jewish. Jesus is the King of all those who accept his authority. And they are all called Christians.

If we are Christians, it means that along with men and women of every nation on earth and from every generation in history, we accept him as our King, with sovereign power over our lives. It means we are his subjects but as we are also members of his body on earth, the Church.

We share his humanity. We share his life and suffering and death. We will also share his divine life and his reign as Universal King and the one thing of which we can be certain is that it will not be what we expect.