

Daniel 7: 9-10, 13-14  
Revelation 1: 4b-8  
John 18: 33-37

We have such an iconic passage today in our gospel reading. Our reading from John's gospel.

Perhaps the most iconic passage, if one can speak of scripture in this way.

Jesus before Pilate – Pontius Pilate – following his arrest.

Of this scene, I often think of a Russian painting of a bedraggled Jesus, pressed up against a wall, hair and clothing unkempt...

Pilate holding forth, casting a big shadow.

But with a shaft of light separating the two men.

In John's gospel it is not really clear who is interrogating whom.

Who is asking the questions?

It is not always Pilate.

Who is answering them?

It is not always Jesus.

And at one point – a little further on from the passage we heard read today – the turn of phrase used leaves it deliciously unclear whether it is Pilate or Jesus who is sitting on the judge's bench.

As it should be!

'My Kingdom is not from this world', Jesus says.

'If my Kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews'.

But it isn't and they are not.

What does it mean for Christ to be King?

No, what does it really mean?

In one sense, we could say that's easy.

We've done the classes, heard the lesson.

Christ's kingship, we might say, is seen, perversely, most clearly, on the cross.

One writer refers to Jesus' crucifixion as his enthronement.

Which is interesting, especially since we have just had an enthronement [of the Bishop of Bristol].

But it's on the cross, we might say, that Christ's kingship is laid bare...

In that it's on the cross that power is turned on its head.

'God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.'

'God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.' (1 Corinthians 1: 26-27)

Weakness is strength

Domination – all forms of domination (the ones we partake in and the ones we suffer) – are shown for what they are.

The cross offers up judgement, a new way of living.

Loving the world to the end.

And in so doing, redeeming it.

Christ is King.

But to say all that – that actually is the easy bit.

We can repeat the lesson – give the right answer, know it intellectually.

But do we live lives that suggest we really believe that Christ is King?

My suspicion is that often we do not.

A lot of the time, our behaviour, my own included, strongly suggests that we don't trust that Christ is King.

Sam Wells, vicar of St Martin in the Field, speaks elegantly on this theme.

Our busy-ness.

Our trying to squeeze in just a few more 'experiences'.

God knows I live my life like that!

A breathless existence as if life is too short.

This suggests, Sam Wells says, that we don't believe Christ is King.

Hear the gospel, he says.

Christ is king over time and eternity.

He has made time and redeemed time.

In him, there is always time for everything that really matters.

And Sam Wells continues, scrutinising other pathological ways of living that we know only too well.

Even a passion for justice, Wells says...

Maybe this too rest on an anxiety that Christ is not just, is not Lord, is not King.

The Social Justice Group watch out!

Any justice we make, Sam Wells says, can only ever be provisional.

But Christ is King.

His justice, his peace passes all understanding.

It will always elude us. But that's not the point.

And I don't think this is a call to become Christian couch potatoes!

But it is a call to be careful.

Who is our King?

Our busy-ness, our shrillness, our anxiety – the anxiety of the Church even – can belie the fact that we don't trust that Christ is King.

We trust in other gods.

So, the question shifts, I think.

It is not about what it means for Christ to be King.

Though it's partly that.

It's more: what might it take for us to live lives truly believing – convicted – that Christ is King?

And this I think takes us in an altogether different direction.

The need for our conversion – yes as an ongoing process.

As I have reflected on this throughout the week, I have found myself going back to basics, reaching for books on my shelves.

What fundamentally is religion about?

What is good religion about?

Because do we not distract ourselves with so much that is superfluous?

And while my enquiries took me far and wide, three people, in particular, inspired me.

Andrew Shanks, a little known but outstanding theologian.

At its best, Shanks says, good theology is about devising imaginative strategies to 'intensify the enquiry'.

To probe the Question – with a capital Q – which arises as soon as we cease to take the course of our lives for granted.

He gives the example of Prince Andrei Bolkonsky in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, lying wounded on the battlefield.

Napoleon addresses him, mistaking him for dead.

'That's a fine death', Napoleon says.

Prince Andrei hears the words as one might the buzzing of a fly.

Napoleon seems small and insignificant.

But life, on the other hand, seemed so beautiful now that Prince Andrei had learned to see it differently.

And in the novel Prince Andrei reflects...

'Nothing, nothing is certain, except the unimportance of everything within my comprehension and the grandeur of something incomprehensible but all-important.'

That's a very special insight – and a place I think we need to journey to if we are ever to live lives sure in the knowledge that Christ is King.

Or take the spiritual writer David Runcorn who is more local (some of you may know of him).

He encourages us to rediscover the hiddenness of God.

'Truly you are a God who hides himself', Isaiah proclaims.

God, always there, sustaining everything, but only occasionally breaking the surface...

Like a giant iceberg.

Christian living, Runcorn says, requires a 'disciplined capacity to separate out what is essential and what isn't'.

It's a 'loving self-emptying in order to be available and attentive to what matters most'.

A kind of detachment, he says, that makes real engagement possible.

It is here we need to journey if we are to learn to live lives confident that Christ is King.

And lastly Rowan Williams.

One writer says of Rowan Williams that one of his key convictions is that truth is never 'merely consoling'.

That's not true religion. That's fantasy.

And the same writer says of our former Archbishop that it's no exaggeration to say that the 'secret engine' of all Williams' work is a 'dread of self-deceptive fantasy'.

That's bad religion.

For Williams, Christian hope is the 'purging of human desire'.

It lies behind his emphasis on the hiddenness of God's work, on crazy eccentric saints, and his tendency to view the spiritual life not as wholeness but more a stripping bare.

It is to these places that we need to journey if we're to learn to live lives seeped in the truth that Christ is King.

So, Christ is King today and always because on the cross power is turned on its head.

'My Kingdom is not from this world', Jesus says before Pilate.

Domination does not have the last word.

Our challenge is to live lives which truly speak of Christ's kingship.

To do this, there is much we need to let go of.

Remember, the spiritual life is a stripping bare before it is wholeness.

Now, if you are worrying about your Sunday lunch, ferrying the children or grandchildren to the next activity, or when you're going to walk the dog, all this may seem a bit much!

But when you pause (as you will!), in the silence of the night perhaps, turn again to Christ, who is King of Kings.

Not my will but yours. Amen.