

The Dean reflects on themes of monarchy and priesthood on the feast of Christ the King.

I met her late majesty Queen Elizabeth only once. It was the occasion of her platinum jubilee and she visited Leicester Cathedral for a celebration of relationships with those of other faiths.

As you might imagine, this visit required many months of preparation. We hired a forest of silver birch trees to soften the surroundings of the Cathedral; I sourced a sofa and a full-length mirror for the withdrawing room, and the police came round and checked every manhole cover and dustbin.

Come the great day, she arrived, dressed in shocking pink and navy blue, smiling and serene. The streets were crowded, and the Cathedral was packed with clergy, other faith leaders and dignitaries. The service went off smoothly and afterwards a few of us were discreetly ushered away for lunch together. I was honoured to be sitting at her majesty's table.

But we never exchanged words, because the reality was that the Queen was an 86-year-old woman, whose energy was limited, and who had learned how to maximise her public impact while minimising the calls on her own resources. The fashion choice, for example, was not an accident – she was 5ft 11ins, about my height, and she needed to stand out in a crowd! At lunch, she paid attention to those nearest to her, ate a modest lunch, and left the rest of us to bask in the glory of proximity.

What, you might ask, has this to do with the gospel?
And the answer is,
absolutely nothing,
and that is the point.

The institution of the monarchy is a fascinating thing to some of us and an anathema to others. But on this feast of Christ the King, it would be a mistake to think that the Kingship of Christ bears any relationship to earthly monarchy

as most of us have experienced it in our own lifetimes, except in the form of a critical and challenging metaphor.

Let's focus first of all on the Kingdom.

That's the Kingdom that we pray for every single time we pray as Jesus taught us, "Thy Kingdom come."

That's the Kingdom that Jesus describes for us in his teaching on the Galilean hills – the Kingdom which will be inherited by the downtrodden, where those who mourn will be comforted, where those who hunger for justice will be fed, where those who are persecuted will find a home.

I don't know about you, but in my experience that bears scant resemblance to the kingdoms of this world.

Yet, this is the kingdom, the governance, the rule, to which we are encouraged to look forward. And, not only to look forward to in an unhelpful, pie in the sky when you die way, but to look for here and now.

Wherever we see the hungry fed, the humble lifted high, respect given to widows, orphans and strangers, we are seeing the Kingdom in our own time and in our own place.

The second thing I want to consider is identity...Who is the king?

Unless you are over 70 or under 3, there has only been one monarch of the United Kingdom in our whole lives. The monarchy is deeply, iconically linked to a single individual, a single image. That was the profile on our coins and stamps, that was the smile, the wave, the persona that we identified with the monarchy.

We have replaced the images with those of our new King, Charles.

So, should we simply replace that image with the image of Christ?

Well, that would be challenging enough if we were to seek a single human image that we could look towards.

If you look around this building you will find numerous images of Jesus. Yet not one of them bears a physical resemblance to the first century Jew of Middle Eastern heritage who lived a human life two thousand years ago. They are fantasies and projections shaped by the imaginations of our predecessors through history. Those fantasies and projections are of a light skinned, European. There is no black Jesus, no brown Jesus, no Asian Jesus portrayed in this building.

What is the right icon for Jesus, for Christ the King of all, not just some of us?

And if we look to our reading from Revelation this morning, we face an even greater challenge.

We are told two things, first that we have been “made a kingdom” and secondly that we are “priests serving his God and Father.”

We’ve been made a Kingdom.

That means we’re in.

We are citizens of heaven.

We are already, in the now and not yet, in that place where the downtrodden are lifted up, where those who mourn are comforted, where those who hunger for justice are being fed, where those who are persecuted have a home.

And in this Kingdom there is only one King, Jesus, who emptied himself to take the form of a servant, who washed his followers feet and died precisely because he did those things and refused to act like a worldly king. Jesus who refused earthly power, and instead submitted himself to its cruelty.

If it’s not clear enough, the Kingdom of Heaven is the world turned upside down.

And in that world, each one of you has a significant and important role.

In this world, which has only one King, there are many priests.

There are myriad people who are called to act as mediators between the world and the Kingdom. A whole community of intercessors, bringing the needs of the world to the throne of the one King. A church where every member worships the King in word and action.

That is you.

That is the charism, the anointing that you received at your baptism.

The spirit of the king is poured out on each one of you so that you can do his will in the world, so that you can be signs of the coming Kingdom, so that you can be his priests.

When Jonnie stands at the altar today he does not do so in his own strength or power, he does so to represent each one of you, to be one priest among many.

He also does to represent the one true priest, to stand in persona Christi, in the person of Christ, the symbolic presence of the King among us.

That's why he is dressed, like our former majesty, in something distinctive. As you all know well, white isn't Jonnie's everyday colour of choice. It is the colour of the liturgical season, the colour of Christ the King. A flash of royal bling.

Perhaps that is the link with the earthly monarchy. Our royal family inhabit roles they have not chosen and we have been reminded this year that they are human and frail, just as we are. Their role is significant in its symbolism and has the power to unite us as a community if we choose.

Christ our King chose to be human and frail just as we are, he gave himself to the world to transform our humanity so that we might one day share his divinity.

In the meantime, we already share his priesthood.

May we and all who follow him, live out that priesthood, bringing the needs of the world to him on our hearts in prayer,

opening our hands to receive him in bread and wine,

and going out into the world to serve our friends and neighbours

in the name of Christ our King.

Amen