Sermon for 'Christ the King', St John's Cambridge – 23.11.25 (Revd J. Shakespeare)
'What kind of God do we serve?'

May I speak in the name of God, all holy; of his Son Jesus Christ, our shepherd, priest & King; and of the Holy Spirit, sustainer & guide. Amen.

Sometimes it's good to stand back & take stock. And today, the feast of Christ the King (or 'Stir up Sunday') is as good a time as any to do so. +As we take stock, at this critical point, just before the start of Advent – a question: v much bound up with the kind of faith we live by: what kind of God do we serve? Do we serve a God who represents power + authority + might, as we usually perceive these things, or a God who represents humility + love + a willingness to identify with the powerless & least in His creation?

For we have to acknowledge, as we look at the Bible and the essence of the Church as it is supposed to be, that Christianity – and the values it represents – is radically distinct from the values of this and almost every age: the values of success, power, materialism & the might of the individual. And not only this, but we need to challenge a Church, as it has often become: a centre of worldly power, by recalling it back (by our faith and witness) to its spiritual roots, in the worship and discipleship of the One who comes among us in humility.

As the Iona Community affirms the surprising character of our Creed, rooted in the story of God's self-emptying love: 'When the time was right God sent the son

Lover of the unlovable
Toucher of the untouchable,
Forgiver of the unforgiveable.
Bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh
Writing heaven's pardon over earth's mistakes
The word became flesh
He lived among us, he became one of us.'

So today, Christ the King, is a good day to ask the question: what kind of God do we serve? +This recalls us to what the Church proclaims, as we turn out sights to Advent: that season which points us back to a God, the Lord of heaven and earth, who chose to come among us, not in great power & might, but in flesh + blood, a living human being, Jesus the son of Mary, born in a stable, in a forgotten corner of the Roman empire. What kind of God do we serve?

I don't know about you, but when I remember him & often when I read about him, he brought tears to my eyes... The way he sought to live the Gospel, to witness to the kind of God we serve, and his willingness to take risks and move beyond our usual comfort zones. +I'm talking, of course, about the late Pope Francis. The last leader of the Roman Catholic Church, who in the 12 years of his Pontificate – as a faithful shepherd - seemed to turn the Church upside down, confounding its harshest critics+ witnessing to a different way of exercising power.

I, for one, was humbled when he chose the name of Francis, that best loved of all Christian saints who, eight hundred years ago, chose to renounce his wealth and follow Christ in a life of profound simplicity, embracing the leper, caring for creation and revealing the love of Christ by his actions, as well as his preaching. My own Patron Saint, in fact, as a lay member of the worldwide Franciscan Order.

+I can't help remembering stories of how Pope Francis, when he was elected, soon took the world by storm: embracing (in St Peter's Square) a man suffering from neuro-fibromatosis, the same disease thought to have been endured by the Elephant Man. In Brazil visiting the slums, just like those he used to serve in as Bishop in Buenos Aires. In Italy phoning a woman had become pregnant by a married man, assuring her that he would baptise her child, even if her local priest wouldn't. And so the story goes on. He washed the feet of prisoners, provided food for the hungry and eschued most of the privileges that normally come the way of the Bishop of Rome. His life was almost a homage to the Magnificat, the Song of Mary, who praises God for 'casting down the mighty from their thrones, lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty.' Overturning the usual values & ways of the world. + I can't help recalling the power present, when I attended – albeit with many others, in Rome – an audience with Pope Francis, during his first year in Office, in 2013.

Why do I share all of this? I do it because I believe we need to rekindle our awareness of what the Kingship of Christ really means, to glimpse a different way, (in our own faith and witness) of being human, and a different way of believing in God. Not just with our minds – the rational part of our brains – but with our hearts, and wills, and everyday actions. Believing wholeheartedly, with all that we are, and all that we hope to become, as servants of Christ our King.

When we look at our Gospel today, the story of the crucifixion, we find our understanding of kingship and our assumptions about the kind of God we believe in, turned radically upside down. From Luke 23.33-8:

'When they came to the place which is called the Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left… and the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the messiah of God, his chosen one' … There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the king of the Jews.'

And in Colossians 1.19, St. Paul writes, *'For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things… by making peace through the cross.'*

We see here the extraordinary paradox of Jesus' kingship. The Christ whom we profess, in whom the fullness of God dwells, is also mysteriously the Christ who lived among us and died on a cross. He fulfilled a unique kingship of service and sacrifice, utterly distinct from any other exercise of authority, before or since. Christ, our Lord, the second person of the Trinity, is both our risen, ascended king, **and** at the same time the crucified king of Golgotha, who came among

us and lived among us... And we see him present in the many people today discarded on the rubbish tip of human history: the forgotten ones; the poor, the hungry, the exploited & confused, those impacted by war & climate change, as well as the recent Covid pandemic, all at risk of being denied a place in life - & the things that many of us expect to take for granted.

Our faith, the faith of all the baptised (some 2 billion people around the world, today) is rooted not in power in any worldly sense, but its exact opposite, in the vulnerability of a God who identifies with the pain of our world, and whose power is mysteriously made perfect in our human weakness.

And in the Gospels, as we look back over our journey of faith this last year, and as we anticipate the coming of Christ at Bethlehem, we find that Jesus' kingdom could not be more different from the structures of power that we see around us in the world today.

It is good news, it requires repentance, the poor & the humble are singled out as being especially welcomed, and all are accepted, rich or poor. At Jesus' trial he says to Pilate, 'My kingdom is not of this world'. At odds with social norms, the kingdom of God, paradigm of the Church, belongs to the 'poor in spirit' – those on the edge of society, the outcast, and all who know our nakedness before God.

God's kingdom upturns conventional values – as Pope Francis reminded us – because it is founded on the radical kingship of Christ, our crucified king. And at Golgotha, God transforms the powerlessness of Christ into the healing power of grace, so that the cross radiates outwards as the single most important event in history. +So for us as Christians, actions which appear to be powerless, become significantly powerful events – the breaking in of God's kingdom – when rooted in the love of Christ.

This is the faith I seek to live by, and which our church, here at St John's – I passionately believe - is called upon to bear witness. This is the faith we are to incarnate in our daily life, in genuinely welcoming others, in being a community that cares, in living lives that make a difference, that challenge the norm, and that witness (in prayer, word & action) to the risen and life-transforming Christ in our midst. And however much the Church fails to live up to this kingdom, Christ is always with us, through his Holy Spirit, drawing us back to himself. It is Christ who ushers in his Kingdom, and it is from the crucified and risen Christ that we receive the gifts of love & mercy & salvation. This is the faith God gives us, this is the life he calls us to, and this is the God whom we serve. And in him our lives our truly set free to witness to his love and power, both here in this parish, in our places of work + right across the world. How much our world needs this message…

Let us pray: Mighty God, most holy and most humble, you have chosen to hear our cry & share our poverty. Come close to our world, kindle our hearts & melt our despair, that with all your creatures, we may live in hope, thro' Jesus Christ our King. *Amen*