

Sermon for Holy Communion on the Feast of Christ the King, 25th November 2018

*Revelation 1:4-8, John 18:33-37*

This could almost be a Thanksgiving service, in solidarity with our American cousins, as Thanksgiving Day was on Thursday. For several years I have been invited over to Hartford, Connecticut, to preach at Thanksgiving at two churches where friends of mine were the incumbents. But now they have retired, and so I'm not chancing my arm this year by being a Brit in the pulpit on the day the Americans celebrate their release from our colonial yoke.

Quite apart from that basic scenario, what I was doing could be hazardous, you know. One year, as I sometimes do, I preached, in the lovely church of St John's, West Hartford, about our human brotherhood - and sisterhood, of course - my message being that we are all equally children of God: and I may just have strayed a little into a message which might just have reminded one of two people of Christian Socialism - although I think this was before Bernie Sanders. Of course most Americans don't know anything about socialism, and so most of the faithful just beamed benignly and shook my hand warmly at the door.

But one of the last people out was a nattily-dressed gent in a dark blue overcoat with an astrakhan collar, highly-polished shoes and a bow tie. He too shook my hand warmly. He said he had enjoyed my sermon. But he went on like this. 'I found it challenging. In fact, come to think of it, I disagreed with you. 180 degrees!' He warmed to his theme. 'You know, if I had still been a young man, I would have had to shoot you!' I smiled weakly, as you do at such times, and I offered him my hand.

In the car home, I told my hosts what had happened - one had actually overheard it - and asked how serious the man had been. How many of the congregation were - 'Carrying?' said my friend Bill. 'Maybe five or six of them'. Now Hartford, Connecticut is the home of the Colt Manufacturing Co, makers of the famous Colt 45 revolver. So now, when I am tempted to think that, in the pulpit, I'm 'six feet above contradiction,' I reflect that, at least if I'm in the USA, I'm still within pistol range ...

But it isn't Thanksgiving today - although a lot of my friends in Hartford regard the whole period from Thursday until Sunday night as the Thanksgiving holiday - and it isn't Advent yet. The beginning of Advent is in a fortnight, on December 2nd. But here at St Mary's we have slightly got ahead of ourselves over the years, and now we have our Advent Carol Service tonight.

This morning, though, we are on track with the lectionary, and we are celebrating the feast of Christ the King. What does it mean to be a king? Can we relate to Pontius Pilate's question to Jesus, 'Are you a king?'

Actually I think this little passage, the conversation between Pontius Pilate and Jesus, comes across rather awkwardly. In the Bible that Godfrey has just read from, (just to remind you), it says:

“Pilate asked him, ‘So you are a king?’ [and] Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king.’” But it’s not obvious that Pilate does say that he’s a king. True, Jesus talks about his ‘kingdom’, but in terms that make it different from any kingdom anyone’s ever heard of. ‘My kingdom is not from this world’.

Eugene Peterson in his Bible translation ‘The Message’, which is not strictly supposed to be a translation, but rather a ‘paraphrase’, puts the conversation this way.

“... Pilate said, ‘Are you a king or not?’ Now for my money, that’s a better translation of the Greek ‘Ουκουν βασιλευς ει’ than the first reading, from the NRSV, which says it’s a literal translation. Ουκουν, ουκ, not, ουν, then. Not a king, then?

And then Petersen goes on to put Jesus’ answer, not as this odd ‘You say so’ (which he doesn’t, he doesn’t say so), but rather a much more likely answer - which does actually work as a translation. Peterson’s version is, “Jesus answered, ‘You tell me.’”

“Are you a king or not?” “You tell me.” You can really hear them saying that. [Peterson, E. 2004, *The Message, The Bible in Contemporary Language*, Colorado Springs, Navpress]

Another good idiomatic translation, incidentally, is from the New English Bible. “‘You are a king, then?’ said Pilate. Jesus answered, “‘King” is your word.” [See <https://tinyurl.com/ycd2qybq>]

The point is that Jesus isn’t very happy with being called a king. Maybe he is thinking back to the first Jewish king, Saul. The Israelites asked Samuel to appoint a king for them, and Samuel was pretty unhappy about it, because he thought that they were better led by a prophet, that the One True God was their true ruler. That doesn’t end well, of course. You can read about it in 1 Samuel. In Jewish history, kings are not necessarily a good way of being governed. In ancient Rome, Sulla, the first dictator, was regarded as being a bad thing. Cicero and Livy both praised the old republic, where SPQR, the senate and people of Rome, ruled, rather than a monarch. The republic gave way to an empire, to the rule of, effectively, kings. There were good ones and bad ones. Nero, for example.

I don’t know whether you’ve been listening to the Book of the Week on BBC Radio 4 recently. This last week - and you can still get it on iPlayer (or BBC Sounds, which it’s called now) - it has been the most wonderful experience, hearing Michelle Obama read from her autobiography, called ‘Becoming’.

In the context of being a king, I recommend episode 5 [<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m00018db>], in which the First Lady, who is at once very articulate, clearly highly intelligent and wise, but who has come from a humble background, arrives in Washington DC, is met by the Presidential motorcade (dozens of vehicles, to protect the President and his family against more or less any threat short of a nuclear direct hit), and then moves with her family into the White House, where even the children's bedrooms had been decorated by 'a high-end interior designer' and there were Old Master paintings everywhere. Then, she says, just when she'd begun to get used to the magnificence of the White House, she went with Barack to London, and they visited a real palace, Buckingham Palace. Buck House!

There is a delicious description of Mrs Obama standing with - or rather, towering above - the Queen at a reception. The Queen commented that Mrs Obama was very tall. Michelle Obama pointed out that she was wearing high-heeled shoes, which added two inches to her height - but yes, she was tall. The Queen pointed to her own, similar, shoes, and said her feet ached in them. So did Mrs Obama's. As she put it, they were just two more or less old ladies complaining about their sore feet. On the strength of that, Mrs Obama very spontaneously, gave the Queen a little hug - which went around the world in minutes - and the Queen discreetly hugged her back.

What price that as a model of monarchy? Real monarchs - well, the most powerful man in the world's wife, and the longest-serving monarch - behaving humbly, sharing their humanity. 'What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?' [Micah 6:8]

I think that in that vignette, Michelle Obama has shown how she, and our Queen too, were really on the way to that style of kingship which Jesus spoke about. Not worldly. Not grandiose. Not oppressive. Humble. As the hymn puts it, the 'Servant King'. "Are you a king or not?" "You tell me."

Amen.

Hugh Bryant