

## **CHRIST THE KING C 20112022** *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Jeremiah 23.1-6; Song of Zechariah; Colossians 1.11-20; Luke 23.33-43

*When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' And they cast lots to divide his clothing. 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!' The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!' There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.' One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!' But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'*

I have been re-reading Hilary Mantel's wonderful trilogy about Thomas Cromwell, who rose from obscurity to become the right-hand-man of King Henry VIII. Thomas Cromwell became a great statesman and consummate administrator, and was responsible for removing the power of the Pope in England and establishing the king's supremacy over the church.

In spite of his growing power and all the work he did for Henry, including helping him into and out of marriages, Thomas had enemies at court and was always at the mercy of the king's fickle moods. Eventually Henry was persuaded that Thomas was a heretic and a traitor and had him executed.

Henry seems to have been a complex character; intelligent, musically talented, physically strong and a lover of sports and hunting. He seems to have been obsessed with the desire for a son and willing to go to any lengths to find a wife who could give him the heir he desperately wanted.

In Hilary Mantel's books Henry is portrayed as wilful, capricious, and immensely powerful, such that those around him were always aware that he had the power of life and death.

We don't have kings like that anymore; some countries are ruled by dictators who command armies to maintain their power, but we are used to democracy and are rightly reluctant to place too much power in the hands of any single person.

So when we talk about Christ the King and call Jesus 'Lord', what are we saying? What do we mean when we say such things?

We surely don't think Jesus is anything like Henry Tudor, or his daughter Elizabeth I, or any of the monarchs of old who ruled by force and were given power purely because they were born to royal parents. I doubt that we would imagine Jesus is like any of the more recent kings and queens either, who were born into immense wealth and privilege.

Jesus was born in an obscure town to working-class parents; he had no wealth or power or privilege. He was executed at the insistence of an educated elite by soldiers of the occupying empire, using their tried and true method of murdering dissidents by publicly humiliating and torturing them to death.

At his crucifixion he was mocked by the religious leaders and the soldiers; call yourself a king? Look at you now! Can't even save yourself.

While they called him names, there was one who saw him differently: a self-confessed criminal also being crucified.

He asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom; and Jesus assured him that he would be with him in paradise.

This is a paradoxical king, one who allowed himself to be completely at the mercy of those who saw him as a threat and those who treated him with casual violence, seeing him as just another uppity Jew.

By the time the letter to the Colossians was written, Jesus had died and been buried, risen from the dead, appeared to the apostles, and ascended into heaven; and the early church was growing and spreading beyond Israel and Judaism.

The writer describes Christ as the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, through whom all thrones and dominions and rulers and powers are created. He is more than all the worldly power we can imagine, greater than any and all powers; and yet he chose to allow humanity to treat him as a convicted criminal.

When Jesus lived on earth, how did he use his power? To take care of people. He healed them when they were sick or disabled, fed them when they were hungry, and taught his followers to do the same.

Jesus spoke of an upside-down kingdom in which the wealthy would go hungry and the poor would be given a banquet. He spoke of a kingdom that has nothing to do with having power over others and everything to do with loving service.

Lord Acton, who died in 1902, was an English Catholic historian, politician, and writer. He wrote this now-famous quote in a letter to an Anglican bishop in 1887:

*"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men..."* Almost always. Henry VIII is remembered by history as a great king, but he was deeply flawed. We are right to be wary of people who seek to exercise power over others because their motives, of which even they may be unaware, are seldom truly altruistic.

Jesus is a "king" who explicitly disavows his "greatness" in favour of humble service: as he said in Luke 22:27, "For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves".

Jesus is a "king" who refuses to use his power to fend off his opponents, much less take vengeance on them — and instead does the opposite, calling on God to forgive them.

He is the opposite of a contemptuous tyrant like Caesar, like many other kings and emperors and presidents.

Jesus' "kingdom" is a reign of servanthood and neighbourhood, a community of love and mercy, open to all.

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth once wrote that the church is born in this story, on that desolate hill of execution. The church in every age is always surrounded and pervaded by the reign of whoever is currently in place of Caesar- we live in the world and are bound by laws and customs. The church is called to be a glimpse, a sacrament, an experience, and above all a proclamation of Christ's dawning reign of love.

The kingdom of God is now and not yet; it breaks into our world, giving a foretaste of the future when Christ will bring all things together under God.

This is a "kingdom" not of domination, but of servanthood; not of mockery, but kindness; not of cruelty, but mercy. For the fullness of that kingdom in all its beauty, the church waits, and prays, and hopes, and prepares — as the season of Advent begins.

The Lord be with you.