

Christ the King

One of the things I learned about Chile, during my 10 years' association with it via my former in-laws, was that you never quite knew when links to Britain might suddenly crop up. The Chilean Navy was founded by Lord Cochrane, to whom there's a monument in York Minster and about who many more Chileans than English people have heard. Then there's the Liberator, Bernardo O'Higgins, the illegitimate son of a Spanish Viceroy of Peru who freed Chile from Spain, having learned his politics and strategy in London: in the smallest Chilean *pueblo* you will find in the *plaza de armas* a statue of this man they call 'The Fat Irishman', genial mockery rather than pulling things down being the Chilean way of dealing with the embarrassing past. The brutal and corrupt General Pinochet's devotion to the UK, which finally contributed to his undoing, was not just about the Falklands dispute.

There's also Chilean slang with surprising references to our Island History. My favourite, among those phrases which can be repeated from a pulpit, relates to people who change their religion. As you'd expect, the default allegiance is to Roman Catholicism, but the growth industry is Pentecostal Christianity. During one visit, I met a member of the extended family who was clearly a 'keen Christian'. Once he left the room, the older generation sighed and remarked, 'he's turned Canuto'. They meant that in leaving the Catholic Church he'd done something as pointless as King Cnut commanding the waves. Both that preposterous monarch and this memorable expression say something that we need to hear afresh on every Feast of Christ the King. This Feast is ironic and, as with much irony, at a deep level truthful: as Paul reminds us, Christ's throne, the cross, confounds worldly wisdom.

Jesus preached the *kingdom* of God and was judicially tortured and executed as *king* of the Jews: the title on the cross is a tabloid headline, sarcastically proclaiming the opposite of what he claimed and taught. The Roman Empire was successful because of its pragmatism: it did not seek to eliminate local customs, religions or even monarchs. The Romans understood that a local puppet king was very useful to them, and such were the Herods: the paranoid tyrant of the Christmas story and the Herod in power at the time of Jesus' trial. This second Herod is captured masterfully in *Jesus Christ Superstar* where he makes his appearance as a sort of Donald Trump: a degenerate buffoon performing a pastiche vaudeville number. This Solemnity is a corrective to all things Trump.

The feast originates, we know, in Pope Pius XI's desire to combat secularism and the rise of fascism and populist nationalism. That agenda needs updating (as I've just attempted to do), but as long as we understand, following Pius, that this celebration is about subverting the nonsense of statues, parades, celebrity and nationalism, we are very much in Gospel territory. This is a last laugh for Jesus, looking to Easter after being judicially murdered under that sarcastic title.

Think about the comic misunderstanding played out between Jesus and Pilate in John's account which we hear on Good Friday: [John 18.33-37]

18.33. Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"

34. Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?"

35. Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?"

36. Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here."

37. Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

Jesus is for the *truth*, not fairy tales, rhetorical monuments, virtue signalling, fake power or cheap celebrity. Kings, to him, are irrelevant to what is true and lasting, the primary and enduring reign of God over all things.

Now to today's gospel, which is easy to hear as a predictable humanitarian lesson: the Christian imperative to active care for the poor, the sick, the imprisoned and the marginal. But we shouldn't miss the reason, the emphasis on how Jesus is acknowledged in his representatives and how those representatives should act to represent him. This teaching doesn't derive from a humanitarian philosophy. The charitable imperative derives from the presence of God in Christ: the *Kingdom of God* is 'like this', careful of the weak, never despising anyone as 'losers'.

The apostles, and their ecclesiastical successors, our bishops, are descendents of a Jewish tradition, called the *shaliach*. The *Shaliach* is an accredited agent, a plenipotentiary, to be treated in all respects as if the sender himself were present. Apostolic ministry, in the person of the bishop and the bishop's delegates, and indeed all the baptized, is a priority in the Christian community. Rejection of apostolic ministry is rejection of Christ himself, hence the harsh judgement at the end. Christ will discipline those on his left because they have actively rejected *him*, so closely does he identify with his family, the Church.

‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’

This isn’t megalomaniac self-regard: it helps to show how the Gospel is not a rule book or code. It is *embodied*, as was The Word of God himself. All who serve him are called to embody the same generous love.

This Feast celebrates the priority of the Kingdom of God over national and personal allegiances. That’s the Gospel. As S Benedict’s motto recommends, ‘prefer nothing whatever to Christ’. We complete the Church year with a commitment to place our allegiance here, in the values of the Gospel, where love trumps all other motives and death is ultimately defeated. The only sort of monarch worth having is one who doesn’t want the job, who takes his kingdom too seriously to bother with status or celebrity. *That* is Christ the King.