

**A Sermon preached at St Mary's, Warwick, by Vaughan Roberts**  
**Feast of Christ the King 2015**

Today's the last Sunday before Advent, that season of preparation when the Church focuses on the appearance of Christ – Christ's coming in the incarnation *and* last judgement. Today's also the Feast of Christ the King. This celebration is a relatively recent introduction, which has its origin in an encyclical published in 1925 by Pope Pius XI. Over time, it's been taken up by other denominations including the Church of England and is an opportunity to celebrate the Kingship of Christ, which doesn't arise during the Church's liturgical calendar. But this year the Feast of Christ the King occurs as the dreadful events in Beirut, Paris and Mali raise challenging questions about how an understanding of religious 'kingship' might relate to our contemporary world and the pluralist society in which we live?

A vivid illustration of the way in which some people see this relationship came on the day after killings in France when a man was reported playing a piano at one of the locations where the atrocities happened and singing John Lennon's song 'Imagine' with its lyrics:

*Imagine there's no countries  
It isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too  
Imagine all the people living life in peace.*

Of course, it's easy to see the attraction of that song but the trouble is: there are *countries*, there is *religion*, there are *possessions* and there is *hunger*. We know that all too well and, however much we may want to, we can't wish them away. So ... what does the notion of Christ's Kingship have to do with where we find ourselves towards the end of 2015? Is Christ's Kingship political, spiritual, or something else entirely? Let me share just a couple of thoughts. First, how did Jesus see kingship? And second, what does that vision mean for us?

First, the language of the Kingdom of God plays a central role in Jesus' teaching but what does it mean? We have to bear in mind that Jesus was speaking in a different time and place. The society in which he lived knew the present reality of kingship. The impact of kings and emperors (monarchs by another name) could be felt in daily life. It wasn't the same as the largely symbolic role that the Queen plays in our lives. The capricious and emotional impulses of rulers in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine were felt throughout society and could not be escaped. That was the situation into which Jesus was speaking. And it would seem that Jesus did see Kingship and the Kingdom as a struggle between God and Satan, between good and evil, and held out a vision of God being victorious in that clash.

But what was that clash? What was the nature of that struggle? Here we begin to address that second question of what Jesus' Kingship means in today's world. One thing that Jesus proclaimed to his hearers was that God's Kingdom is not vested in or owned by those who had power in Jewish society. God's rule could not simply be equated with those in authority – Roman or Jewish. In all societies and all faiths there have, at one time or another, been people who've said something to the effect that: 'I have the power and

that's because God has put me in charge.' And that can still be the case even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Jesus taught that God's Kingdom wasn't just a plain reflection of social order or the religious and political status quo – it was about God's values and God's vision for human flourishing in creation. And this is where we draw near to those terrorist attacks and the Kingship of Christ.

Speaking personally, my reading of the Gospels is that Jesus' vision for God's Kingdom is one that's inclusive. He went to the margins of *his* world to affirm those who felt, for various reasons, that they were far from the religious centre and therefore far from God's presence. Jesus' stories often contrasted those who were self-confident about their righteousness and their place in God's Kingdom (the pious Pharisee, the busy wedding guests, the scribe on his way to Jerusalem) with those who were not (the unworthy worshipper, those wedding guests from the highways and byways, the Samaritan traveller). Jesus' presented vision of a society, a kingdom, which included rather than excluded, which said you're never far from God even if you're on the margins, and that God cares for even the smallest sparrow, the tiniest fraction of creation.

This vision of God's Kingdom seems to me to be a close cousin of the kind of pluralist society there is in France, in this country and in democracies across the world. That's not to say that these societies are perfect – they're not. Nor is it to say that democracies equal the Kingdom of God – they don't. But the human flourishing that God wishes for creation does not come about by eradicating human difference – either by unjustifiable violence or by wishful imagination.

In an interesting article in the week's *Church Times*, Canon Alan Billings (who is also the Police and Crime Commissioner for South Yorkshire) argues one of the things that was under attack in Paris was the kind of pluralist society found in many parts of Europe and elsewhere. He writes that, in centres: 'across Europe, every weekend, you will find men and women, young and old, of all ethnicities and faiths, mixing freely together, enjoying one another's company, and exchanging views. This was the target.' (*Church Times*, 20<sup>th</sup> Nov 2015 p 17) And he believes although policing is important in our response to these events, we need something more and he argues: 'The antidote to the terrorist is a cohesive society. The stronger the bonds between different parts of the community, the more difficult it becomes to undermine from within.'

If Billings is correct – and again, personally, I think he makes a good point – then Jesus' vision of God's Kingdom and Jesus' understanding of Kingship as something that includes rather than excludes has an important part to play. It should be inspiring and motivating at many levels but *particularly* for churches because the role of the churches in building cohesive and inclusive communities has the potential to be vital.