

JESUS IS LORD **CHRIST THE KING - 2009**

Some Anglican churches in Britain have a curious feature in their internal decoration – the royal coat of arms at the east end of the Sanctuary – high up and in a place of honour. It is there for a purpose – part of a point scoring exercise rooted in one of the most bitter disputes in English history. When King Charles lost the Civil War, the Church of England was abolished. Loyalist Church of England clergy were sacked in their thousands, and only a puritan, reformed style of protestant religion was allowed to exist. So when the wheels came off the Commonwealth after Oliver Cromwell's death, and the monarchy was restored, the pro Royalist clergy and country gentry decided to rub the puritan losers noses in the final reality of their defeat. Putting the royal coat of arms above the altar was a vivid way of reminding all who came to Church that the old ways were back, and that the old team was in charge now. The stories of Kings and Queens are never far away in any account of the origins and development of our church.

But this morning I am going to concentrate on royal language in another connection. At every baptism service one of the congregational responses goes like this, "Blessed be God, Jesus is Lord!" In some churches now, any reference to Jesus as Lord is censored out of the liturgy as supposedly being an example of patriarchal oppression. That's the way things were at All Saint's, Ponsonby when I went to an early morning Eucharist there a few days ago. In a church in which popular feminism is the driver's seat, all reference to God and Jesus are functional and gender neutral. Which is a pity because referring to Jesus as Lord has got nothing to do with his masculinity – it is a political statement.

In the Roman Empire loyalty was a big thing. Having pulled together the many different peoples, language groups, and cultures of the Mediterranean world into a unified political entity by force of arms, the Emperors came to believe that their subjects should develop a relationship of personal loyalty to Caesar. So from the time of Caesar Augustus or the Emperors began to award themselves semi-divine status. This new title of Kyrios, or Lord in English, was an expression of the growing cult of personality. Images of the Emperor were set up in towns and cities, and people were required to make an act of homage to them, or to swear an oath of loyalty before them.

For most people this wasn't a big deal. Engaging in these odd little rituals just rolled off them like water off a duck's back. This was what you had to do to keep the scary people in Rome happy and appeased. For Christians it was a different matter. The imperial personality cult created an intolerable clash of loyalties for them. How could they acknowledge the Emperor as a semi-divine being when at their baptism they had given their allegiance to the Lord of heaven and earth, the only God who really exists, who had a complete claim on their lives. The Emperor had made a claim for himself which was blasphemous and idolatrous, and there was no way they could compromise with that. In fact, this was the litmus test that condemned Christians to death in times of persecution. When brought before the magistrate they were invited to make an act of homage to the Emperor's image, as the gateway to saving themselves. If they wouldn't co-operate on this one point that was the end of them. Today, on the feast of Christ the King we are being invited to acclaim him as our Lord, the one to whom we owe a costly obedience and loyalty. He is not as earthly monarchs are – he does not require grovelling court rituals to make him feel good about himself. Instead he calls us away from competing, idolatrous loyalties that would distort us and destroy us if we gave them full play in our lives.

Since we do not live in a world of Roman Emperors, and of imperial persecution, the calls on our loyalty are not at first sight quite so clear cut. They occur like this. When we resist foolish and corrupting desire that would destroy our integrity for the sake of him, because we can imagine his sorrow and disapproval at what we might do, we acknowledge him as our Lord. When we carry out a costly act of service to a suffering human being, or other creature, because we anticipate that he would do the same thing in that situation, then we acknowledge him as Lord.

When we hear the Christian religion being mocked or run down, and we courteously but firmly stick up for the God we love, then we acknowledge him as Lord. If we have house guests staying for the weekend, and we say on Saturday night, "tomorrow morning I am going to church, and you would be very welcome to join me," instead of just mutely staying at home out of solidarity with non-church goers, then we acknowledge him as Lord.

If we see an opportunity to commend the faith that is within us to a friend or colleague who is searching for a faith to live by, instead of just keeping the good news to ourselves, then we acknowledge him as Lord. If our employers, or our favourite political party, or our country asks us to do something that we think is ethically strong, and we say no, even if it

brings a lot of trouble in to our lives, then we acknowledge him as Lord. These acts of obedience, often small, but usually costing us in significant ways, help to make his invisible Kingdom become a reality. By acknowledging his authority in these ways we show who we think is really in charge around here. The Roman Emperors understood that, and it is why some of them decided to persecute the church.

Living under authority is of course not at all a cool thing to do these days. But it is part of what being a Christian is all about. Because his gentle yoke sets us free from the dominating powers that are abroad in our world, that do not intend our good. And when he exercises his health giving directions in our lives we are delivered from being at the mercy of our moods and whims. A different notion of freedom then emerges. We are set free from ourselves, able to be there for others, and for God.