

What Kind of King?

What does it feel to be humiliated?

What does it feel to be abused?

What does it feel to be hated?

Ask Jesus!

What kind of King was Jesus?

That's my question today?

When he was born the wise men brought him gold – the sign of a King.

When he is dying, Pilate places above his head on the cross, "The King of the Jews".

What kind of King was he?

All over the world, Christians will be looking at this theme today. Today marks the end of the church year. Next week we enter Advent, and begin a new journey, as we travel towards the birth of Jesus.

But today, our lectionary reading takes us to the cross. It forces us to stop and pause and linger and observe and ask the question – what kind of King is this?

But before we look at this, I want us think about what was going on in the world at this time. The Roman Empire was strong and Palestine, where Jesus was born and raised, was under its control. The people of Palestine were looking for a liberator.

Luke begins his Gospel with the Emperor Augustus Caesar having a census taken of the Roman world. This meant one thing and one thing only, Rome was in charge and the Emperor had to be obeyed and worshipped.

It's into this context that Jesus is born – but even in birth we discover that this is a special birth and that he is born with a purpose to bring in God's Kingdom.

So, it's no accident that when Jesus begins his ministry, on his lips, are the words, *the Kingdom of God*. It is no accident that on the cross, he is called the *King of the Jews*.

So, this is the climax of the story, this is the clash of the Kingdoms. The Kingdom of Rome and the Kingdom of God.

You might expect this to be our Easter reading, but it is a very relevant reading for this time of year, because it makes us explore the theme of Jesus as our King and it asks the question, what kind of King is he?

Over the last few months, we've heard much about Kingship with Prince Charles, stepping up to the mark to take over from our sadly departed Queen.

We all know a little about what this entails, its privileges and responsibilities.

So, when we think of Kingship, our minds might turn to pomp and ceremony; to palaces and grand homes; to large estates and opulence. We would not think of a King being crucified on a cross, crowned with thorns and wearing a blood-soaked robe and yet that's the paradox of today's reading. It turns the world's notions upside down.

A paradox is a logically self-contradictory statement or a statement that runs contrary to one's expectation.

Graham Kendrick, the brilliant hymn writer uses paradoxes in his lyrics. One of his best known hymns, *"Meekness and majesty, manhood and deity, in perfect harmony – the man who is God"* and the one that we'll sing after this sermon, *"Come see his hands and his feet, the scars that speak of sacrifice, hands that flung stars into space, to cruel nails surrendered. This is our God the servant King."*

I love the paradoxes that lie at the heart of the Christian faith.

God chose to become human; God chose to enter our world and to die on a cross; God chose to humble himself that we might be raised up.

In a sense, where we end the Christian year today connects with where it begins next week.

It ends on a wooden cross, it will soon begin on a wooden feeding trough. It ends in controversy through crucifixion and the spirit of God being returned to God at the cross, and soon it will begin through the controversy of a pregnant virgin girl, in whose womb, inspired by the Holy Spirit, lies the Son of God .

The life of Jesus from start to finish, is a life of austerity, a life of self-denial, a life of selflessness. It is far removed from the life of a King as we know it and yet it was the richest life ever lived.

The Apostle Paul wrote – “Although he was rich, for your sakes he became poor, so that you, through his poverty, might become rich” 2 Cor 8v9

So let us look a bit deeper at this story today.

They crucify him at the place called the skull – The paradox is this, this is not Christ's death but in fact it's his coronation. This is the moment that he came for, when he would ascend into his Kingdom. This moment is the turning point in human history.

He had to go down to the depths that he might rise to the highest. The paradox here is that he is in a place called the skull; he is in the valley of dead bones; the place where the worst of people would literally hang out. He is seen to be a criminal and it's here that the King of the Universe, the Son of God, hangs like a scarecrow. It is a sad and solemn picture and yet it becomes the place of victory. The cross, it's our symbol, it's our unifying factor as Christians. It is the symbol that the Kingdom of God has won the battle.

But let us consider what kind of King he is?

He is a King who believes in forgiveness. He is a King who is still praying for others, as his life blood ebbs away. He is a King who is totally committed to human beings and as he hangs, his body limp, he musters the strength to pray, *“Father forgive them for they don't understand what they are doing.”* This is a King that cares for others; this is a king that the world has shunned, but who doesn't let that get to him, rather he rises above it, and still has the dignity and the composure to bring to God all who are causing him pain and rejection. *“Father forgive them!”* This is our God, this is the God we follow.

There is no greater example of sacrifice, than this, as he prays *“Father forgive them!”*

Then on top of that, he has criminals dying with him. On either side are men who have committed crimes against humanity and the state. Men who have murdered and stolen and so they know that they deserve their punishment, but one of them sees in Jesus something beautiful, he sees Jesus as he truly is, a King.

He sees Jesus as one who cares even for criminals and murderers, and so he says to the other criminal, “Don't you fear God, since you are under the

same sentence, We are punished justly for what our deeds deserve but this man has done nothing wrong.”

He is pointing out that there is a miscarriage of justice; that the man in the centre is innocent and has no right to be punished and in fact this man is a King – not of this world but of another Kingdom, God's Kingdom.

He asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his Kingdom and Jesus replies, *“Today you will be with me in paradise”*.

This is a beautiful moment in the scriptures; a holy moment; when Jesus is there to comfort a dying man and to bring him hope, that he will be there for him, when he enters his Kingdom.

In the words of the revered Catholic theologian, Henry Nowen, “Jesus is the wounded healer”. The one whose wounds have made us whole.

What does it say to us this morning?

It tells us that we have a King whose heart is full of love. We have a King who understands us, not from the outside but from the inside; a King who identified totally with our humanity, who was tempted, who was rejected, who was crucified. This is our King. This our God!

Whatever trial or situation today, may you take courage from this passage and know that Jesus is with you. He hangs in there with you. He is besides you, listening to your cries of anguish, and your fears and your doubts. He is right there in the midst of your pain and he takes it on himself. He takes our sin, he takes our guilt, he takes our lives and he gives us hope and peace and joy.

So, this church year ends with Jesus on the cross, as our King, and a king who empathises with us. Of course, Jesus didn't remain on the cross, he was placed in a tomb and three days later he rose from the dead.

We are told that he will return again, as a King, a King who will judge the living and the dead.

Let me finish with this final thought.

*What kind of king
would choose a donkey,
and not a mighty stallion?*

*What kind of king
would choose the way of pain,
and not the path of privilege and pleasure?*

*What kind of king
would choose a thorny crown,
and make a wooden cross his throne?*

What kind of king...?

*The King of love,
defender of the poor, the suffering;*

*The King of self-giving, not self-serving:
who overturned death,
and promised Paradise
without conditions.*

Christ is our king—
let us walk in his footsteps, and follow him – today and forevermore.

Because one day, he will say *well done good and faithful servant, enter my Kingdom.*