



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 26th November 2023

Readings: *Psalm 95; Matthew 25.31-46*

The Sunday before Advent

Perhaps by now you have played with some images you find helpful for giving Jesus the place and status that you feel is authentic for your life, your way of thinking, how you see the world.

Personally, I find it pretty difficult to better St Paul, in the way the New English Bible translates him. In the opening prayer this morning, I borrowed from its version of Romans 11. There, God as God is in Jesus, is described as ‘Source, Guide and Goal of all that is.’¹ Those of you who have had to listen to me for a few years now will be forgiven for thinking I overuse that phrase. Well, I *do* use it a lot. But it’s not like my unthinking overuse of ‘brilliant’ for which I teased myself recently. No, this use of ‘Source, Guide and Goal of all that is’ is entirely deliberate, because it is who God in Christ is for me.

I can sing ‘Crown him with many crowns’, and ‘Christ triumphant ever reigning’, and mean it. I can recite Psalm 95 with its affirmation that ‘God is a great King above all gods’, and be truthful. I can pray that collect about the ‘mystery of Christ’s kingship’, content that it speaks for me. But when all other phrases have been exhausted, I can best express my understanding of Christ, my reverence for Christ, by affirming that the One who is ‘that than which no greater can be conceived’,² is ‘Source, Guide and Goal of all that is’. But that is me.

For a hundred years now, following the lead of the Catholics inspired by Pope Pius XI, the Church has realised that a fine way to sum up who Jesus is, what his ministry and mission mean, the redeeming impact of his birth, death, and resurrection, and his call to the church to be an embodiment of the Beatitudes,³ is to speak of Christ’s place and role today as the Reign of Christ, hence describing him as King.

It does not have to be taken as advocating monarchy as the only conceivable system of government for nations today, but as an idea to bestow upon Christ a unique place as the one ‘from whom, through whom, and to whom are all things’.⁴

And with Christian people throughout the world today we’re invited to take seriously this image of Christ’s reign. I want to suggest to you two implications of doing so.

The first is that the language of ‘Christ reigning’ suggests the attitude with which we might relate to Jesus.

We will each have our own way of doing that. In the Anthem this morning, the Choir will remind us of the song Colonel Ken Rathje wrote, when he was on a placement with us two years ago. For him Jesus is ‘friend and coach’ – at once both companion and mentor. For me, the most authentic language combines three things: mystery, respect, and warmth. Indeed, although I have never met King Charles III, I sense that if I did, it may be the same. We see him at the Cenotaph and State of Opening of Parliament and there’s a remoteness and mystery about it all. We see him speaking about causes he champions, and I respect that he cares and has campaigned. We see him on walk about, and he connects with a smile, a quip, and even a tear.

Might these help us find a way to relate to King Jesus? Maybe, maybe not. The whole point of Sharing Together was to explore the different words and ideas that work for different people.

The point, you see, is that ignoring him doesn’t quite cut it. Yes, we can eschew Kingship or friendship as the models for how we regard and relate to Jesus Christ. We don’t have to buy into

¹ Romans 11.36 NEB

² St Anselm of Canterbury 1033-1109 – the ‘ontological argument’, see Chapter II of *Proslogium* or Discourse (1077-78)

³ Matthew 5.1ff

⁴ Romans 11.36 NRSV

‘mystery, respect and warmth’, either. But we cannot leave him unanswered. We can’t look through him like we might the neighbour we don’t like, or the *Big Issue* seller.

When all else is said and done, a leader is incomplete without followers. ‘To follow’ is an active thing. It moves us on. It doesn’t leave us where it finds us. Nor is it a dismissive response. To follow a football team is to support them, cheer them on, possibly even to buy their merchandise. We don’t follow them by disregarding them. Their triumphs thrill us. Their disasters devastate us. They matter to us. So, what about Jesus Christ

In her book about creating change, Barbara Kellerman emphasises the place of following. Indeed, she calls the book *Followership*, and contrasts dynamic following with what she calls ‘bystanding’. She writes:

‘Bystanders observe but do not participate. They make a deliberate decision to stand aside, to disengage from the leaders and from whatever is the group dynamic. This withdrawal is, in effect, a declaration of neutrality ... Think of bystanders as free riders, content to let others make the group’s decisions and do the group’s work.’⁵

On the Feast of Christ the King, we are given opportunity to reflect upon the narrative we’ve rehearsed since Advent Sunday last year, and to choose whether we will be bystanders or followers. The bystander gives nothing to ‘the least of these who are members of my family’; the follower hears Jesus say: ‘just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ So our charitable work, our personal relationships, our resistance to injustice, to marginalisation: these things are all part of our following as we refuse to be neutral bystanders. As Søren Kierkegaard so pithily prays:

‘You are the way and the truth – and it was followers only you demanded. Arouse us therefore if we have dozed away into this delusion, save us from the error of wishing to admire you instead of being willing to follow you and to resemble you.’⁶

Secondly, how Jesus lives out that kingship, points to how leaders in our own time might live out their role. What is the King Jesus model of leadership?

‘It is a truth universally acknowledged’⁷ that leadership in our era is not always exercised well. We can find excoriating pictures of it. One recent account of serving in the Houses of Parliament and in the Government, laments how ‘nine years in politics had been a shocking education in lack of seriousness’. The writer goes on,

‘Many of the political decisions which I had witnessed were rushed, flaky and poorly considered, the lack of mature judgment was palpable, the consequences frequently catastrophic. And yet we had continued to win elections. ‘Politics’ dominated the news – but it was treated as a horse race where all that mattered was position - and to enquire after the character or beliefs of a politician was considered as absurd as to ask the same of a horse.’⁸

Of course, it doesn’t have to be that way, nor is it true of every one who seeks a leadership role. Thanks be to God for those who see it differently, and year in year out embody the *Principles of Public Life* espoused by the Committee on Standards in Public Life chaired by Lord Nolan:

‘Selflessness, Integrity, Objectivity, Accountability, Openness, Honesty, Leadership.’⁹

It may be that one way of seeing leadership differently, one way into Lord Nolan’s Principles, is to take to heart the King Jesus example. His manifesto, ‘The Son of Man came not to be served but to

⁵ Kellerman, Barbara 2008 *Followership: how followers are creating change and changing leaders* Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Press page 97

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard 1813-55 LeFevre Perry D. ed 1956 *The Prayers of Kierkegaard* Chicago: University of Chicago page 96

⁷ Austen Jane 1813, *Pride and Prejudice*, page 1

⁸ Stewart, Rory 2023 *Politics on the Edge: a memoir from within* London: Jonathan Cape page, 356f

⁹ Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life/the-7-principles-of-public-life--2>; accessed 20th November 2023 The seven principles were originally framed in 1995 by Committee on Standards in Public Life, under its first chair, Lord Nolan (1928-2007).

serve’,¹⁰ turns on its head the ‘all that mattered was position’ school of thought. As another recent critique of public life concludes, ‘the answer is service’. Highlighting the example of Her late Majesty, this writer closes their book,

‘What better legacy for her life than that those in public service, particularly politicians, should cast aside the mantle of selfishness and devote themselves unashamedly to duty and the service of others.’¹¹

On the Feast of Christ the King, Jesus’s model of monarchy is not only revered but offered as the benchmark for all who would be not bystanders but followers, so much so that they begin to resemble him.

There was a politician who died thirty years ago, who in death gained the approbation of colleagues across the party divide. A minister friend of his preached a few days later, and said,

‘... what they mourned ... was the man of integrity, the man with no hidden agenda, the man at ease with himself and with his fellows, the man with a zest for life and passion for the things that ultimately matter. And such was his witness, however imperfect – for no-one embodies these things perfectly – that people *recognised* that these are the things that ultimately matter, and whether they knew it or not, what they honoured in this Christian man was the Lordship of his Master.’¹²

May it be so, for those whose leadership makes Hansard and the broadsheets, but also for those of us defined by a followership that is quieter more discreet, but makes a difference, in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ, Source Guide and Goal of all that is. Amen

N. P. Uden

26th November 2023

¹⁰ Mark 10. 45

¹¹ May, Theresa 2023 *The Abuse of Power: confronting injustice in public life* London: Headline Publishing Group page 330

¹² Brown, Gordon and James Naughtie 1994 *John Smith : life and soul of the party* Edinburgh and London: Mainstream Publishing page 193 – from a sermon on 15th May 1994 by Prof James A. Whyte at Hope Park Church, St Andrew’s.