

Christ the Sovereign Priest

“*Having made peace through the blood of his Cross*” (Col.1:20)

Few churches are keeping today’s festival, on this day, and according to the wording on which I shall be drawing! The commemoration is of Christ’s kingship, but it is only modern in origin (1925) and falls at an unremarkable time of year. It is, by coincidence, taking up my last theme. On Trinity 18 we considered Christ’s Messiahship and the rather curious (and one-sided) debate that Christ introduced about Davidic descent. Well, probably not entirely coincidental... Trinity 18 sometimes falls immediately before this Sunday or coincides with it (in which case that Messianic Gospel would have been the ‘Last Gospel’ today). This may have some bearing on why we celebrate this now (in an otherwise dull Season).

So why bother with a purely papal initiative, and on a day discarded by a much later pope anyway? (When the observance was shifted to the last Sunday of *Ordinary Time*, it displaced a significant Sunday – what we Anglicans remember as *Stir-up*, with its overwhelmingly important theme of Judgement.) This mass’s content could never be dismissed as a papal plot. The material is so significant that it would seem perverse to shun it. It tells of the fulfilment of hope and prophecy in the revealed faith. Few titles of Christ could be more important than universal king.

Objections are always possible, of course, so it might be argued that kingship was unknown to the earliest Hebrews; kings have little relevance for nomadic people. We remember the old rhyme: “When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?” It is to such considerations that the seventeenth century Levellers turned. Yet the Chosen People, at length, became a settled nation and church, so kingship, priesthood and Temple soon became central to the national consciousness, we cannot get back behind this.

Again, the more radical in temperament would say that this was precisely what Jesus was doing or attempting to do – certainly His reactions to kingly acclamations were reserved (not least in today’s Gospel) – but that the Church misunderstood Christ’s intentions from the outset (before ever one word of the New Testament was written!). It is not easy to argue against ‘conspiracy theories;’ and reductionist Biblical Study seems to be a high-brow form of the phenomenon! It is improbable that the first Christians would have hazarded so much for a mixture of misobservations and fantasy, and, realistically, can we know more than they? but there is insufficient time to argue the points here.

Instead, it is today’s liturgical text that claims attention. Firstly it is instructive to see, even as early as 1925, that liturgical composition was weakening. Turning to the day’s *Vere Dignum* (or Proper Preface) there are arresting statements [but the totality is bloated]. Christ’s rule is not merely one of power but of priestly kingship, He is priest-king so as *to offer up* a kingdom to the God and Father. He is priest in order to make the offering, He is king “of all creation” in order to have something to offer. The oblation is made in His Blood (as we read in the Epistle) but this gift includes the elect, the ‘nation’ that is washed in that precious Blood and saved by it. The restoration of God’s people is itself the offering.

The idea of making over to the God and Father any kind of gift is, of course, difficult to articulate. It is all God’s to start with, so how can it be brought to Him? The background here – more a matter of plain observation than of revelation – is that creation turned in upon itself, it disbelieved its Creator and offended Him. It is against this state of affairs that Christ’s kingship is set.

So the Preface proclaims: “ut seipsum in ara Crucis, hostiam immaculatam et pacificam offerens, redemptionis humanae aeternum et universal regnum, immensae tuae traderet Majestati....” [when on the altar of the Cross He offered Himself a pure victim to bring peace, He effected the mystery of human redemption by subjecting every creature to His rule, and delivered to thine infinite Majesty an eternal and universal kingdom...] It is a gladsome and triumphant picture of Redemption, and shrewd in what it leaves out. The God and Father is not depicted as an offended Tsar, although the merest hint is retained: “a pure victim *to bring peace*.” Another redemptive idea is hinted at: “subjecting every creature.” This probably includes the fallen angels (devils), the

victory over which was so insisted upon in the first millennium of the Catholic Church.

But it is an earlier expression that raises most questions: “when on the altar of the Cross.” It is a phrase which is taken to be primitive – well, it is quite old – but certainly not Biblical. The first use might be in the fine Paschal hymn *The Lamb’s High Banquet*. It is not, however, without problems. Despite the saga of the Akeda [Abraham’s binding of Isaac]; as far as the Temple ritual was concerned, the victim’s killing did not take place on the altar, the blood was brought to it. Anthropologists explain that sacrifice can be boiled down to: “pre-kill, kill, post-kill.” The sacrifice is not in the death but in the donor’s dedication, and the victim’s *life*, a life *located in the victim’s blood*. The complexity increases because of the particular word used here for altar (both in the hymn and today’s passage). It is not “altare” but “*ara* Crucis” (hence I had to quote the Latin). ‘Ara’ is a lesser or minor altar, so what then is the major one? Possibly Christ’s Body itself, or an ‘ideal’ altar in Heaven? Yet neither the New Testament writers nor the early Fathers ever refer to the Cross as any kind of altar. [Hebrews 13.10 might mean the heavenly altar, but not the cross.]

Now this may seem a long-winded and nit-picking point. The phrase has a ring to it, it has been in use (to an extent) for some thirteen hundred years, it reinforces the Cross’ sacredness, what’s the problem? The Eucharist is the offering of Christ’s Sacrifice so we might be led to suppose that in identifying the altar with the Cross, Christ must suffer again, or even dies again, on each altar. It is not the Holy Cross that reappears in the mass but Christ’s Precious Blood (that bears His Life); N.B. the unusually precise wording in today’s Epistle “made peace by the Blood shed on the Cross.” Alternatively, ‘the altar of the Cross’ can suggest that sacrifice is punishment. This opens the way to thinking that the wrath that the Eternal Father had been harbouring towards sinners fell with its full force on Christ, instead of on us – Christ as ‘lightning-conductor,’ if-you-will? Obviously the expression does not *necessarily* lead to such conclusions. We love and venerate the Holy Cross, it should be central upon our altars and traced upon our bodies, only caution is urged, as we take *that particular phrase* onto our lips, there could be hidden implications.

Even when we have tried to untie these knots, it is still difficult to describe how Christ “delivered an eternal kingdom to the infinite Majesty.” He retrieved it for the Godhead by fulfilling what sacrifice had promised, but had never actually managed to deliver – until Christ filled this crude act with Himself. However rightful the triumphal element of this festival may be, it is hard to “sing the Lord’s song in a strange land,” and the modern world is a very strange land indeed. We need to look not into ourselves but into this mystery. Yes, it strains our minds and our affections to look into something so ancient and so futuristic, so earthy and yet abstract and sublime. Yet without looking we become absorbed in the pettiness of the temporal existence, and the self-congratulatory posture that has become so characteristic of our world recently. God throws us a life-line in the sacraments and in the traditional liturgy which we simply must grasp in penitence and hope. Yes, the Church is now saying ever more curious things and acting in ever stranger ways. When there is an earthquake it is hard to know where to run, but Christ delivered us by delivering us to His Father. We must remember that the impossible part has been done, and we simply have to remain constant to the mystery of salvation, the mystery of faith.