

Our Lord Jesus Christ, Universal King

Year B

Christ The King.

Today we celebrate Christ the universal King. He did not claim to be only the king of the Jews. His kingdom was not to be an exclusive one.

He is king of all who are on the side of truth and listen to his voice.

(Readings: Daniel 7: 13-14. Apocalypse 1: 5-8. John 18: 33-37.)

A story is told of a man who travelled to London to attend an interview for an important post in the security services. When he arrived at the appointed place he found five other applicants in the waiting room, all discussing their respective prospects.

Unusually, there was no secretary or assistant on duty to ask directions or to offer advice, merely a sign on a door which stated that applicants were to knock and enter the room at fifteen-minute intervals, beginning at eleven o'clock. They were to leave the interview room by another door, so that the nature of the questioning could be kept secret.

The applicants discussed the strange arrangement; they reflected on what questions they might be asked; and they wondered what qualities would be needed for the post.

At eleven O'clock, on the dot, one of them, who said he had been the first to arrive, went to the door of the interview room, knocked, and entered.

The remaining five applicants continued to discuss various matters among themselves. And so, the time passed. At a quarter past twelve the last applicant to arrive rose from his chair, walked over to the door of the interview room, knocked, and entered. When he stepped into the room, he was confused by what he saw. Behind the large oak table, that dominated the room, sat his interviewers. They were the same five people who had been in the waiting room. – The interview was already over.

In today's Gospel Jesus isn't so much interviewed, rather, he is interrogated by the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, the man directly responsible to the emperor for keeping the Roman rule in Judaea.

For the occupying power, Jewish festivals were regarded as potential emergencies: at the time of the Passover, therefore, Pilate came with his garrison to Jerusalem, where he kept his security forces on alert in case of a riot or national uprising.

Jesus has been handed over to Pilate by the Jewish authorities. It is Passover time and Pilate offers to hand Jesus back, arguing that Jewish law can more than easily deal with the case itself. The authorities refuse, so Pilate questions Jesus about the charges made against him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

Jesus replies to Pilate with his own question, "Do you ask this of your own accord. Or have others spoken to you about me?"

Well, one cannot help but wonder just who is interrogating whom. If the Governor is interrogating his prisoner, the prisoner, that is to say Jesus, has his own agenda for interviewing the Governor.

Jesus calls Pilate to face the truth of the question he has asked. But Pilate is above worrying about the consequences of his own questions. Instead, he defends himself by saying that he is not a Jew, and that Jesus' own people have handed him over. Even so, Pilate is curious about what Jesus has done to provoke such fierce hostility.

Jesus refuses to satisfy Pilate's curiosity but points out that his kingship is not the realm of political struggle. His claim to be king, therefore, can hardly affect national security. Jesus' kingship is in the realm of witnessing to the truth, something the Roman Procurator is having great trouble doing.

Pilate has already declared Jesus to be innocent. If he acts on truth, then he will free Jesus. But whereas Pilate may be sincere in his concern for Jesus' safety, he is not serious about the truth he has discovered. Jesus is innocent. But that truth is not going to influence Pilate's real behaviour. And so, Pilate fails the interview. And he fails it because he cannot meet the most basic condition of witnessing to the truth.

As Jesus' Passion unfolds, he has to witness to his own truth. He remains stubborn in his trust of the Father, in spite of his accusers' catcalls and in spite of the silence of his absent friends. He may wonder where all the witnesses to his truth have gone – his apostles, and all his disciples. And he may wonder why they are so few in number whilst his enemies, and the authorities, are out in force. He may wonder why he has ended up being pushed around, and abused, and brutalised for the sake of the kingdom. And he may doubt if the pain will ever go away.

To crown it all, Pilate ensures that Jesus has his title above his cross: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews". Is it meant as some kind of sick irony? Is it meant to be a subtle form of protest? Is that the nearest Pilate will ever get to witnessing to the truth? Who knows? Perhaps not even Pilate. What we do know, however, is that Jesus' unfailing witness to the truth marks his true kingship, his true majesty.

As his subjects, we will be judged on how we have witnessed to his truth, and to his love, and to his way. For a place in his kingdom, we will be questioned on our own attitudes and behaviour. We don't have to wait for the last judgement to find out the questions we will be asked.

When it comes to places in his kingdom, the interviews are already taking place, right here, and right now!