

Draft Sermon for Christ the King Sunday, with Churches on the Isle of Mull



Colossians 1:11-20

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while *joyfully* giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.

He has rescued us from the *power* of darkness and transferred us into the *kingdom* of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him *all things* in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers-- all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before *all things*, and in him *all things* hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.

Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing.

The people stood by, watching Jesus on the cross; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"

The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"

But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"

And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

The four **ruling** R's of our time are **reduce**, re-use, recycle, repurpose.

Broadly in that order, since we're now at a completely unviable level of pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

The latter is of course not easy for folk like yourselves who rely on lifeline ferries, though that immediately gets us into the question of who bears responsibility for the harm that's done, and whether what seems "unavoidable" **can** be offset in some way: though if the islands are part of Scotland and the UK, then that responsibility should be carried by those who can change it, rather than blamed on those who can't.

Is it the responsibility of the people at the sharp end - and I may here also think about those I've met who live on the fast-disappearing islands of the Pacific - or of those who have been given the power to make changes for the good of all?

For most of the world church, this last Sunday of the Christian year is observed as something on the lines of "Christ the King Sunday".

The message it can't and must not be allowed to carry, though is this:

"Here's your king.... keep your head down, your nose clean, and don't argue."

The name and title 'Israel' which we'll be pinning on Jesus in Christmas carols not many days from now, is that of someone who argues, wrestles, even, with God. And a good king listens, rather than crushes, dissenting voices.

In the UN climate conference just concluded, some countries have more influence over the organisation than others, either due to their size, military power, or effectiveness in international diplomacy.

Yet, this is one of the genuine positives about COP: that the big polluters actually are under **some** pressure from voices never heard at other meetings. The cats really **do** look at the kings.

You're meeting today as Reformed Christians: heirs of a movement in European Christianity, which for all its faults encouraged everyday folk in the language of love-songs to address Jesus.

An intimacy which strict royalists would surely find improper. Reclaiming the closeness which power and privilege would steal away.

Like when we use the word 'Heaven' to suggest something distant and apart, as if the word did not also encompass the reality of the sky above us, part of the unity of Creation.

For **God is the maker of Heaven and Earth**, sky and soil. So many many times we read that in Scripture. Whatever else you need it to mean, "heaven" is part of creation. Intimately, dynamically connected with the Earth.

It's taken more than a century for the unifying idea of the greenhouse effect to become widely credible. That those **"laws which never shall be broken"** can be shattered.

Surely the earth is big enough that we can pollute with impunity? Not when there's that many of us. Held together, like it or not.

It's not done the church any good to try to separate one part of Creation - the Earth - from another - Heaven, or the Sky, though Jesus in the Lord's Prayer teaches us to pray that God's will be done **throughout**.

Some nervous Christians, perhaps mindful of the same faults of kingship which exercised the writers of I Samuel, have softened it to **"reign of Christ"**. As they might put it:

"We know what kings do, and we want none of that!"

But with the urgency which enriches our faith in the awareness of a global climate crisis no longer future or straightforwardly to be solved, it might be better to **go with it**: to recycle and carry forward whatever is good and true about Christ as king, who himself said **his** kingdom, really is not like that so arrogantly thought of as "this world".

This year it feels different, not least because we actually do have someone we call “king”, which brings it just slightly more down to Earth: all those worship songs still being written that go on and on about the “**king**” are now confronted, for better or worse, with flesh and blood. A wee bit more ‘incarnate’ you might say.

What should a “king” do? When I was involved in dedicating a jubilee tree on Colonsay this year, the people there came up with the beautiful truth, that we’d had a monarch who, for seventy years, had planted trees.

If you would rule, then live an exemplary life.

Though for Charles 3rd thus far, being king seems to involve trying hard not to have an opinion, and doing what you’re told by whoever happens to be prime minister in any given week. Despite a life-long interest in environmental protection. “No you shall not go to the Ball (in Egypt.)!”

We’re just a day or two past that gathering, some three thousand miles from here, of more nations than we’ve ever heard of, to discuss what can be done to respond to a mess they’ve made together.

The similar great circus I witnessed in Glasgow is a competition of magics. Everyone screaming about how much they care, how much they’ve invested in nature based solutions, and terribly nice young people trying to convince you that small nuclear reactors are such a good thing after all. And the man on the National Pavilion of Qatar who gave me a delicious coffee to assure me that his country wasn’t as bad as the Saudis because they only produced gas, not oil.

But our king is not allowed to go.

There’s a certain irony there: the custodian of power in the UK state absolutely must not use it. Not even to encourage other countries.

Irony is perhaps the most powerful tool of language, and in God’s hands it only grows in sharpness.

We can marvel that in the treatment of Jesus by those he was first sent to, it’s through wood and nails that he becomes one with the Tree of life. The blood of the Cross, the **Tree**, as the Bible also puts it [Acts 5:30]

Which unlocks the deeper aspects of God's covenant with the Earth and with All Flesh: and of course it's the efforts completely to eradicate God's authority in Christ that reveal not just that authority, but authority arising from connections: that idea in the Bible letter of "holding together" in something those concerned with the environment are increasingly calling 'the web of life'.

Christ as King is not about domination, but rather the sustaining of life-giving relationships; and as is made clear elsewhere in Colossians, diversity, not uniformity, is how Christ achieves unity, be it in the church or in this planet.

So too, the multiple layers of divine irony in the events of the crucifixion: Jesus, born **and** adopted into the same dodgy claim as half the Jewish population to descent from King David, labelled a king in the eradicating humiliation of the cross by Pilate, in a sickeningly calculated insult to every aspiration of the people the Roman Empire had asked Pilate to rule,... this same Jesus risen from the dead is praised as king through centuries, by hundreds of millions. Undermining (- or it ought to be undermining, wouldn't you think -?) the model of domination that Empires prefer.

*For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself **all things**, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

The past couple of hundred years, there's been a slightly different power struggle: a game of thrones and crowns, you might say, about who and what rules whom.

Some like to think that human beings rule the planet, and therefore, whoever can pull off the stunt of forcing **them** into line, might reasonably be entitled to the title of king, or monarch, as it were. Rule this one species and you rule the world. Whether through war and guns or through an addiction to fossil fuels, which also causes wars. Or through continuing, as does the UK government, to offer licences for additional oil and gas exploration whilst claiming leadership in carbon reduction.

I hope you can think of the right words for that.

In the Pope's letter to 'everyone of good will' in 2015, he noted that the Earth 'rules' us. Almost without exception, even those who commented favourably on that letter completely ignored that point. And it's the '**not being in charge**' that even churches - especially larger churches - have most difficulty with.

[What if you gave your loyalty to a King who ruled by delegation? By putting you on a throne, in order, in turn, to pass that parcel?]

I like the story of King Canute, who in the eleventh century, would have claimed overlordship of the Isle of Mull. Knut let himself be talked into sitting on the beach and commanding the tide not to come in and wet his robes.

But the sea came up as usual, and disrespectfully drenched the king's feet. Jumping back, the king cried: "Let all the world know that the power of kings is empty and worthless, and there is no king worthy of the name save Him by whose will Heaven, Earth and the Sea obey eternal laws."

Mind you, Knut carried on as King. Presumably "by the grace of God".

Amongst people of faith, more widely, there is nonetheless that awareness that since we remain very much at the mercy of the cycles of nature, God alone can be said to rule.

However mighty a given human organisation might aspire to be, we've managed to disrupt, rather than **rule** the Earth of which we are part.

Floods and famines and droughts have always reminded human beings of the power of God as creator, and in the book of Job, it's accepted that God does have very much more on their plate than providing a sunny day on Mull for those with a bit of time on their hands.

But look a few verses either side of the most frequently quoted verses on justice and upright living in the Bible, and you'll find Creation, one way or another, enlisted to hold human beings to account. So what is happening in Pakistan this year both is and isn't a 'natural' disaster. This is what you'd have heard from the scientists in Egypt, because I heard it in Glasgow last year.

Equally in agreement with Scripture and current experience, is that the poor suffer first and hardest, which judges all the more those who sit on the sidelines and do nothing at all. (Not even what is promised under "loss and damage".)

Or allow their own rulers to do nothing at all. We sang that hymn before the readings '**Crown him with many crowns**' - it's an open secret that no ruler, no regime, can hold power in the long-run, without the consent of their people.

In the **letters** of the New testament, despite a somewhat skewed presentation, it's clear that the criterion for whether a pretender to kingship or whatever is that they'd always seek the common good.

But we do need good leaders. Social activists like to write letters of protest to their MPs or MSPs - when did you last think of writing a letter of **appreciation**, when they get something right?

What do you do to express your loyalty to **Christ** the Kingthrough the rulers you are given?

