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| **Christ the King**  **John 18: 33-37** | | |
|  | May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our strength, our redeemer and our king.    So, we are at the end of the year.   No, I’m not being premature, today is, officially, the end of the year – the end of the church year, of course.  The feast of Christ the King.   Next Sunday, we start again, a new year starting at Advent Sunday.  Now it’s no surprise that the final Sunday should be the feast of Christ the King because this is what our whole year has been building up to.  51 weeks ago, it was Advent Sunday 2011 as we started to think about the coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ, just as we will next week.   At Advent, our focus is on preparation for the birth of Jesus; and then the celebration of his birth at Christmas, and then his appearances -- to the wise men, at the wedding in Cana, in the transfiguration at Epiphany -- and then he sets his face toward Jerusalem.  After the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday, we are plunged into the days of Lent, suffering, sacrifice and self-denial.  We move inexorably to the betrayal and death of holy week, the silence of Holy Saturday, but then the miracle of resurrection at Easter, and the prayer, over 50 days, for the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost.  And then the church moves through ordinary time, and we are called to reflect on the Kingdom of God in everyday life, but all of it moving toward the conclusion. You can see it in the imagery of the Book of Revelation, the completion of the Creation and the City of God.  Christ the King Sunday is about the Lordship of Christ. In the words of the Revelation to John, he is the “ruler of the kings of the earth.” And yet there is a clear distinction in the passage from the Gospel of John between the rule or reign of the leaders and God’s vision. “My kingdom is not of this world,” Jesus says. Jesus *did* come upon the earth to establish a kingdom. It is just not what anyone was expecting.  So what were people expecting from the fulfilment of prophecy, from the long awaited coming of the Messiah?   Well, I suspect they were expecting a bit more pizzazz, a bit more bling and a bit of fire and glory.   People in first century Palestine had a pretty good idea of what a King should be like – after all, they had one of the most successful kings around sitting on the throne – none other than the dubiously charismatic King Herod.  Whatever way you look at it, Herod was, without doubt a very successful king – at a time when being a King was no simple task.   If it wasn’t bad enough that the Romans were the occupying force in Israel, the king had to manage plenty of aggressive neighbours, not to mention, controlling his own internal warring factions and Herod developed the blueprint for how to do all this with some significant success.  Herod died in the year that Jesus was born, but at that time he had been on the throne for 34 years.   Now I know that doesn’t sound much compared to our own dear Queen in her Diamond Jubilee year but, believe me, in Israel 2000 years ago, 34 years was some achievement.  Not only that but he had huge influence on Israel at that time.   His architectural influence is still present in Israel today.   He built the city of Caesarea on the coast, near Tel Aviv; he built Masada, and, most curiously given his apparent lack of real faith, he rebuilt the Temple. A portion of that temple survives today:  the Wailing Wall, or the Western Wall. These are massive structures.  Whilst he was not a religious man, he could use religion for his own purposes. Everything -- sports, art, architecture, shrines, palaces -- all of it was for the purpose of consolidating Herod’s power and leadership and establishing his legacy.   And he was ruthless in how he went about establishing that legacy.  He had 10 wives and when he doubted the faithfulness of his favourite, he had her murdered.   He doubted the intentions of 3 of his sons, so he had them murdered as well.   He gave instructions that on the day of his death Jewish elders from a number of villages were to be killed simultaneously -- this way lamentation would be heard across Israel (this was, mercifully, not carried out). He hears of the birth of Jesus and orders the massacre of the innocents, which sent Mary, Joseph and their newly born child, Jesus, into Egypt.  This was not a king who ruled by consensus, this was a king who ruled by fear and who believed in his absolute right to rule and to use that right to impose his will on anyone who got in his way.   This was a king who was determined to leave his imprint on his kingdom.   In preparation for his death, he literally had a mountain constructed in the flat desert.  He wanted people to think of him and revere him long after he had died -- in fact, you can see the Herodium all the way from Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives. The Herodium is impressive, and a few people visit there, but not like the crowds that flow into the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and how that would have riled him!    So, when it comes to models of Kingship at the time of Christ, look no further than the best of the best, the incredibly successful King Herod.   Here was the benchmark by which a king would be measured and here was the expectation of the style of kingship of the coming Messiah.   What did they get instead?    A king born in a stable, not a palace.   A king who called prostitutes and tax collectors his friends.   A king who knelt and washed the feet of fishermen.   A servant king?   How could a servant be a king?   And finally, a king who dies a criminal’s death, nailed to a rough wooden cross and mocked by Pharisees and Roman soldiers.  That’s what they got and how disappointed they must have been.    But they got something else as well.  Something they could never have expected from a king.   They got his sacrifice.   They got his very life, laid down for them so that they could truly enter his Kingdom, not for 34 years or their natural span but forever.   This is the part they could not understand. This is the part most people still don’t understand now, 2000 years later, that Christ’s kingdom is without parallel, it has no hierarchy and it has no end.    Herod was a king with a love of power whereas Jesus was a king with the power of love.   Jesus made the hard choice in his Kingship – the easy choice would have been to follow the expectations of the people and use the example of Herod to rule with power and authority vested in fear and not in love.   In his time in the wilderness, the Devil takes him to a high mountain and dangles the earthly dream of kingship before him.   The Devil tells him he can have power and dominion over everything he can see – how much more attractive must that have been than the alternative option of being beaten, broken and agonisingly murdered on the cross.    But Jesus chose the one true way, the way of love and the way of the cross.   He turned away from the flawed and human concept of kingship to show what real kingship was and that is why, 2000 years later, people ignore the Herodium and flock to the church of the Nativity.   That is why Christ is worshipped throughout the world when Herod and all the earthly kings are simply footnotes in history.    But let’s bring all this closer to home.   Do we honestly honour Christ as our King?   What does it mean to us to have Christ as our King?   Well I’m reminded of a famous and true story from the 1920’s that I am sure is familiar to many of you because the story was told in one of the most successful British films ever made and it is the story of the great Scottish evangelist and athlete Eric Liddell that was immortalised in the film Chariots of Fire.    Now, it may be that many of you are too young to have seen Chariots of Fire when it was released or to have missed it when it’s been shown on television.  I notice that the DVD was re-released this year thanks to the Olympics and there is actually a stage show running in London as we speak – so apologies if you know the story but bear with me as I remind you of the salient highlights.    Eric Liddell was born in Tianjin in China in 1902, the second son of the Rev and Mrs James Dunlop Liddell who were Scottish missionaries with the London Missionary Society.   At the age of 6, Eric and his elder brother were sent back to England to Eltham College, a boarding school for missionaries.  Their parents and his sister Jenny, returned to Scotland and so Eric split his boyhood between boarding school and his parent’s home in Edinburgh.    At Eltham, Liddell was an outstanding sportsman and became captain of both the cricket and rugby teams and his headmaster described him as being entirely without vanity.  And he was fast.  In 1921, he joined his brother at the University of Edinburgh to study Pure Science and athletics and rugby continued to play a large part in his university life and it wasn’t long before he caught the eye of the Scottish rugby selectors.    In 1922 and 1923, he played in seven out of the eight 5 nations matches and in 1923, he also won the AAA championships in athletics in the 100 yards and the 200 yards.  In the 100 yards, he set a British record of 9.7 seconds that wouldn’t be broken for 35 years.    He was selected for the Great Britain squad for the Paris Olympics in 1924 with a focus on the two main sprint events, the 100 and 200 metres.   Now those of you who have seen the film, Chariots of Fire, will know that Liddell had a dilemma in that the heats for the 100 metres, his favoured event were held on a Sunday.   In the film, a bit of Hollywood license suggests that this came as a last minute surprise to him but in reality he had known about it well in advance and, as a result, had withdrawn from that event as it would have compromised his strongly held belief that the Sabbath was solely to honour God.    Because of this, he had decided to enter his least favoured discipline, the 400 metres, in addition to the 200 metres.   Having managed to secure bronze in the 200, he then went to the blocks for the 400 metre final, a distance he was reckoned to have no chance in.   As he walked to the blocks, one of the American team masseurs passed him a piece of paper with a quote from 1 Samuel, 2.30 on it, “Those who honour me, I will honour”.    Now, at that time, the 400 metres was considered a middle distance race and typically, runners would coast until the sprint finish but, inspired by the scriptural quotation, Liddell raced the whole of the first 200 metres to be well clear at the half way point and then held on against the challenging Americans on the home straight.   Not only did he win gold, he broke the Olympic and world records with a time of 47.6 seconds.    That was the unanticipated happy ending but preceding that Liddell was put under a lot of pressure to compete in the 100 metres and, indeed in the two sprint relays which he also dropped out of for the same reason – that their heats were on a Sunday.   At one stage, the British Olympic Committee told him that in Continental Europe, the tradition was that the Sabbath finished at noon on a Sunday so he would be fine with the afternoon heats, to which Liddell replied that his Sunday lasted all day.    How much pressure he actually experienced we will never know but in the film, Chariots of Fire, the suggestion is that not only were the members of the British Olympic Committee involved but so was the then Prince of Wales as president.   The film shows a wonderful moment where the Prince of Wales appeals to Liddell’s patriotism and duty to crown and country and it is at that point that he replies, “God my King is greater than the king of England, Wales and Scotland.  To honour God is more important than to honour the king of England.”    Whether or not he actually uttered those words we will never know but it would be entirely consistent with his beliefs.  For Eric Liddell there was not a shadow of doubt as to who he was answerable to.  He knew that Christ was his King and it was to Christ that he dedicated his life.    Despite his fame and potential fortune, Eric Liddell returned to China and the missionary work for which he lived his life straight after his graduation in 1925.  He remained there, a servant of his King until his death in a Japanese internment camp in 1945.   Never once did he doubt his calling.    Could we say the same?   Could we have the courage of our faith and belief in Christ as our King to stand against the pressures of the secular world to conform?   On Christ the King Sunday we discover the Lord not enthroned in the heavens but welcoming the stranger, visiting the imprisoned and the sick, feeding the hungry.    Christ the King is the moment toward which the whole Christian story has been moving -- the adoration of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. And yet in our end is our beginning. Next Sunday we will begin again that wonderful journey of waiting and preparing for the fulfilment of God’s promise, the miraculous gift at Bethlehem.  I’ll finish with some words from Gian Carlo Menotti’s modern opera about the Maji travelling to see the Christ child, “Amahl and the Night Visitors”..    “The child we seek doesn’t need our gold On love, love alone he will build his kingdom His pierced hand will hold no sceptre His haloed head will wear no crown His might will not be built on your toil Swifter than lightning He will soon walk among us. He will bring new life and receive our death,  And the keys to his city belong to the poor.”    **Tom Crotty** |  |