

**READINGS – CHRIST THE KING – 20 November 2021 – Zoom version
Revelation 1.4b – 8, John 18.33 - 37**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



When the Feast of Edmund, King and Martyr, falls the same weekend as the Feast of Christ the King, life is good.

A ninth century East Anglian King, crowned at Bures on Christmas Day 856, a young man, but a young man who was a good king – he ruled justly, wisely, the Chroniclers have lots of positive things to say about him. He led his people when they were threatened by a host of Vikings attacking across the North Sea. He was a Christian king fighting the heathen – you can imagine the battle. Even in defeat at the battle of Thetford, he was brave, withdrawing down the Roman Road, to regather his troops and no doubt fight on. When the Vikings caught up with him, somewhere in Hagelisdun Wood, when they told him to renounce his Christian faith, he refused. He stood up for what he believed and, like his King, King Jesus, he faced his death bravely. Tied to a tree, “shot full of arrows until he looked like an hedgehog” (to quote a Chronicler writing a few centuries later). Then his head chopped off, thrown into the bushes. A day or two later, when his followers could come to find his body, they found a wolf, guarding the head of their King – “hic, hic” barked the wolf – in East Anglia we have wolves who can speak Latin – and when they put the head and body together, they were miraculously fused.



His body was taken to Beodrichsworth, in time an abbey was built over the site, and the town became known as Bury St Edmunds. A place of pilgrimage, a place of miracles, a place where Royalty came to say their prayers, to make offerings. If I remember right, Katharine of Aragon, Henry VIII's first wife, called in en route to Walsingham – said prayers that the child she was carrying would be a son and would survive. The child was a son, named Henry Duke of Cornwall, but he died within weeks. Imagine how different the history of England might have been if he had been a King to follow his father. The Reformation that destroyed Edmund's abbey – and Darley's abbey – might never have happened. Would we have got our church on the hill, would Bury have got its Cathedral? An interesting thought.



Wall painting in the church of St Peter and St Paul, Pickering, N Yorkshire

I have no doubt that one reason Edmund remained a popular saint was because of his likeness to Christ. The young man, the king, the martyr. It is interesting to ponder why two churches in Derby, Allestree and Allenton, and two in Derbyshire, Castleton and Fenny Bentley, are dedicated to him. He is often suggested as a better Patron Saint of this country than St George – who is far more mythical and basically foreign – and is obviously important to me because I worked in his Cathedral for a decade, and named our youngest child Theo Edmund (may he rest in peace).



St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Today is the Feast of Christ the King – and some folk find that difficult. I had a Reader in Ponteland who had a real aversion to this day. He struggled with the idea of Christ in Majesty – he felt far happier with a human Jesus, a suffering servant, Jesus at our level, he did not find the emphasis on Christ as King helpful to his faith. And I know what he means.



We are fortunate, we live in a country where our Queen is a woman of faith. A family which, with one or two exceptions, have given themselves to service, and give so much. A Royal Visit is a pleasure – I have met Her Majesty once, it was a privilege. From what I saw of it, Prince Charles and Prince William did more good at COP26 than any other British leader, with the exception of David Attenborough – I certainly have more faith in them than I do in any elected politician at the moment.

But does that help with our image of Christ the King? Yes, actually, a King who cares for people, who cares for creation, who goes out of his way to heal divisions. A King of justice, of honour, of truth – in the mess that is this world today, I need that image of a strong King, of God holding us in the palm of his hand (I know I use that image a lot, but I do find it powerful). I want a King I am honoured to kneel in front of. When I did meet Her Majesty she spoke to me for less than a minute, but in that time I had her complete attention. When I spend time with my King, I know Christ gives me his full attention – and that means an awful lot.



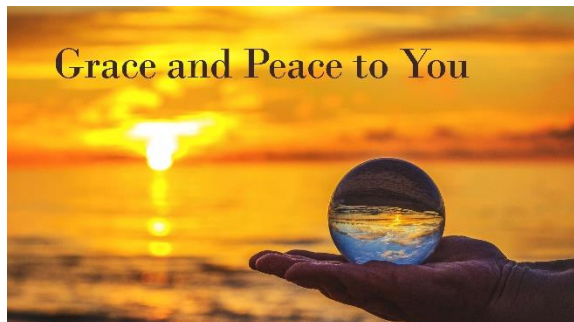
How would I feel if I was less content with my lot? If I was your Vicar between 1914 and 1918, having to deal with deaths of so many of the young men of our parish. Would I buy into the idea of duty and honour and sacrifice, of patriotism and kingship? There are two stained glass windows at the little church of Slaley in Northumberland – Christ on the cross, looking down on the dying soldier, a soldier who is holding Christ’s foot, the nails in the foot, as they both die. At the back of the church is the image of “my gallant friends, Captains Guthrie, Laymey, Joicey, Ross and Jackson who gave their lives for King and Empire ...” and they are joining the queue, walking up to Christ in Majesty, seated on his throne. I visited that church just a fortnight before Gareth died – he was in hospital, waiting to go on the list for a second heart transplant, but we all knew that the chances of him being well enough to cope with that operation again were minimal – and somehow in those two windows I found the strength to go on. I’ve put the images on the front page of the church website and at

<http://www.northernvicar.co.uk/2013/12/13/slaley-st-mary-the-virgin/>



In our New Testament lesson, John is writing to churches in Asia. They are churches in towns in what is now Turkey – if you want to see where they are, read Revelation 2 and 3. John is traditional the same John who wrote the Gospel, often seen as the youngest of Jesus’ disciples – so by the time he wrote this book, this extended letter, he was an old man. He was writing to seven churches in Asia, men and women who had lived through incredible times since the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Those who were Jews by birth had seen

the Jewish nation strangled by the might of Rome, they may well have seen their temple destroyed – imagine that. Even in the height of the blitz, St Paul’s cathedral was not allowed to be destroyed – Winston Churchill had decreed it. Some of those who now worshipped Christ had not got a Jewish background, they had come to a new God, a new purpose – and you can imagine how difficult it was for them to fit in, how difficult it was for a church community to form, to cope with a variety of people, to build a purpose in their faith. Human interactions are not easy, never have been – just because we’re church, we’re still human.



In all the human mess, “Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come”. Grace, God’s love in action – peace, shalom, wholeness – the sense of God’s love and purpose, of everything that is good. The past, the present, the future – everything.

The image of the spirits who are before God’s throne – the link is often made to Isaiah 11:2-3:

"The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD, and He will delight in the fear of the Lord."

Lovely picture – again, something to hang on to.

“And from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” Not just a human, not just Christ on the cross, but the ruler.

At the heart of Christmas



The Feast of Christ the King. The last Sunday of the church year, next week is Advent Sunday, we start again – “O come, O come Emmanuel” (I highly recommend next Sunday evening’s Advent service, it is the way to start your Christmas with the right perspective).

'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

I am the A and the Z, the beginning and the end. I am a tiny child, a vulnerable baby – I am the one who went to the cross.

Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.'

May that be true for us all. Amen.