

May I speak in the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Lover.

The feast of Christ the King that we celebrate today has a relatively recent history. The man described by one biographer as 'Hitler's Pope' helped make the feast part of the Church's calendar in 1925. Pius XII had a strong sense of Papal monarchy and it is not hard to see why the Kingship of Christ might have appealed to him. He worked relentlessly against the social democratic movements of his day, even to the extent of disbanding the Catholic democracy party in Germany. The reason for this rested on a very sharp division between the secular and the sacred. Pius was quite happy to remove Catholics from secular politics, provided the rights and powers of the church remained unaffected. Of course, as time soon showed, Pius's anti-democratic stance was one of a myriad of factors that assisted the swift ascension to power of Adolf Hitler.

As we ourselves celebrate the feast of Christ the King, we have to face up to the same tensions that characterise Pius XII's view of politics. And the question everything hinges upon is where do we find Christ's kingdom? For many people Christ's kingdom is not of this world. Indeed, in the Gospel reading today, Jesus says as much when he remarks that his kingdom is not from here. However, if we completely remove Christ's kingdom from where we find ourselves, and where the Church finds itself, we end up divorcing God from involvement in the world. The paradox is that while Christ's kingdom is not of this world, it is nevertheless stretched *across* this world. The way Pius XII sought to resolve this was in setting up the

Church as the unique place where that kingdom is found. Outside the church the boundaries of the kingdom stopped and so could be forgotten about, but inside the church the kingdom would be found.

Now it is very tempting for us all to subscribe to this division of reality. After all, if we come to church surely we deserve a special place beside Christ? But as you know the truth of the kingdom is a lot more complicated than that. For a start, let us think about the very word kingdom. Medieval in origin, kingdom conjures up courtly images of a monarch with attendant courtiers. It is a very stable and settled word, implying a clear area of control, and a strict hierarchy of membership. Kingdoms have rulers and servants, and tightly patrolled borders. However, if we look at Jesus' words, what he is talking about is something quite different. For him, his rule or *basileus* as it is in Greek is a question not of territory and power, but of truth. Jesus specifically says in reply to Pilate that 'Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.'

The idea of Christ's rule here is something quite different from a conventional sense of kingship. And in remembering Christ as King, we would do well to sever Christian kingship from all that we have known of kings. Christ's rule is much more existential than the attempts made by the church at one time or another to limit who can belong to him. All too often, Christ's kingship is presented as a power with which to judge those who fail to live lives in a particular way. However, in the Gospel, Jesus's own words point to a much more fluid and dynamic understanding of his rule. Christ's rule is not something enclosed in a particular formulation of the creed or a particular understanding of religious tradition. Instead, Christ rules in the hearts and minds and lives of all those who seek

after truth. Existentially, it is as people grappling and engaging with truth that we draw closer to Christ. This transforms the breadth of Christ's kingdom from the narrow preserve of the few to a visionary horizon of universal participation.

At its theological best the idea of the kingdom is an almost utopian concept. It is something for all people, a place where all can live out the truth of their own lives. And yet unlike utopias, the kingdom is not something that we relegate to an unseen future. Although it is a visionary idea, it is not unrealisable nor is it indefinitely postponed. By celebrating Christ the king, we instead celebrate something already all around us. The rule of truth and love that is the kingship of Christ is all about truth and love in the here and now. It becomes distorted when the kingdom is portrayed as a never-never land or when it is treated as the sole property of one segment of humanity. By contrast, the rule of Christ as the rule of truth and love is something that is made concrete every day. Something that is found wherever truth and love are present.

This vision of the kingship of Christ is one that requires us to respond with imagination and honesty. We have to have imagination, as only with that can we see the fullness of love; and we have to have honesty, as only with that can we see the wholeness of truth.

One person who combined these qualities of imagination and honesty in his own religious quest was the painter poet William Blake. Very different to Pius, Blake stood for a radically egalitarian and inclusive approach to Christianity: his was a vision that certainly did not exalt the idea of earthly monarchy. A decade ago there was a fabulous exhibition in London of Blake's work. Of the many hundreds and hundreds

of pictures on display one in particular caught my eye. It was one of Blake's colour bedazzled canvasses inspired by Dante. It was a scene picturing the adulterous Francesca da Rimini in the embrace of her lover. What was so striking about Blake's interpretation was the ethereal luminescence of the embrace of the two lovers set against the dark and gloomy underworld. Blake was clearly making the point that Francesca da Rimini's love was something that brought light to the darkness, and could not be quenched.

I think that in our interpretation of Christ's rule of truth and love we could do worse than to take Blake's picture of Francesca da Rimini as our emblem. Blake graphically underlines the fact that Christ's truth and love occur in the most unexpected places. In the picture they are a couple to be adored, rather than condemned. Today there are different practices of exclusion that we also need to shine the light of Christ on. And we must all do our part to include without limit all who live in truth and love live as living in Christ. Affirming the rule of Christ, we are called to recognise the breadth and depth of Christ's presence in our world. As 'truth' and as 'love', Christ is all around us. And although for the most part Christ remains hidden from our perception, he will always be manifested in the lives of those who seek love and truth. For where love and truth are, there we will forever find the kingdom. Amen.