

# CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	23 November 2025
Service:	Eucharist, Christ the King
Preacher:	The Revd Canon Dr Earl Collins, Chancellor

## Sermon for the Festival of Christ the King

Today's festival was first established in 1925 by the Roman Catholic Church. In a world increasingly dominated by dictators and authoritarian regimes, the then Pope made an eloquent gesture by introducing the celebration of Christ as King. All were to look to the one true model for the exercise of power: our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who through his death and resurrection was acclaimed as King of the Universe.

The Church of England adopted it in the last quarter of the 20th century and placed it on the last Sunday of the year, before Advent begins. Immediately before we begin that great season in which we celebrate Christ's coming in humility at Christmas and in glory at the end of time, this festival invites us to lift our eyes and look to the one true King of Kings. As the angel Gabriel told Mary at the Annunciation, Jesus is the only king who will reign forever and of whose kingdom there shall be no end. But to understand the kingship of Jesus, I think we need to change what we mean by the word "king."

The Gospel passage appointed for this festival could hardly make that clearer. We have just heard St Luke's account of the crucifixion. The Evangelist brings us to Jerusalem and to Christ nailed to the cross. Having stood before Pontius Pilate, the embodiment of Roman imperial power, stripped, beaten and humiliated, Jesus has been condemned to death, and the soldiers have carried out the governor's command. Put on display as a blasphemer and rabble rouser, Jesus has been exposed to public opprobrium. Over his head they placed the charge against him: "This is the King of the Jews." The soldiers joined in the mockery and even one of the criminals hanging with him added his scorn to denounce a so-called Messiah who had saved others, but now it seemed, could not save himself.

A funny kind of king was Jesus! This terrible scene of torture and humiliation could not be further removed from the usual imagery we associate with royal events or the pomp and circumstance of state occasions.

- A king wears a crown: but the only crown Jesus wore, pressed painfully down on his forehead, was a crown of thorns.
- A king presides adorned in robes of state, surrounded by bodyguards: but Jesus was stripped naked and his guards divided his clothing among them.
- A king sits on a golden throne dispensing judgements, but this king's throne was a wooden cross and he was judged guilty of treason.

That is why we need to change our minds when it comes to the meaning of kingship, or rather to let God change them for us. All the words we habitually use about royal power, all those regal words, must be purified of their merely earthly meaning. We need to plunge them into the fire of Christ's passion and receive them back from God reshaped for us in new ways – God's ways.

What then is power as God understands it? Jesus teaches us: it is not the power of coercion but of suffering love. And Jesus teaches us even more: it is self-sacrifice, giving up one's life for others, even for those who are filled with hate. St. John Chrysostom, the "golden mouthed", one of the greatest preachers of all time, who himself suffered persecution for challenging imperial power, can help us understand that better. Preaching about Christ's crucifixion he insisted, "I call him king because I see him crucified because it is fitting for a king that he should die for his subjects!"

It is fitting that a king should die for his subjects. Christ the true and only king died for us on the cross, died for all his subjects, loyal or unloyal, without exception. The eternal Son of God, Jesus Christ, the King of the Universe, laying aside the robes of glory that were his right – "humbled for a season" - entered our world as a conquering hero, stripped and ready to fight the forces that oppress us. His battle was with the three enemies that have waged war against human beings since the time of our first fall, when we lost our primal innocence. The New Testament calls those enemies the devil, sin and death.

Christ our King struggled with the devil but emerged triumphant from the battle. All the Evangelists emphasize his conflict with this mysterious figure, "the prince of this world," who was to be cast out and despoiled of his power by the Lord of glory. But we must not think merely of imaginative mythical devils. The figure Jesus faced is the one whom he called "the father of lies." On the cross, Christ, the truth incarnate, defeated lies and untruth forever – finally and fully.

Christ our King also struggled with sin – “in the garden secretly and on the cross on high” - but again emerged triumphant. Sin is our refusal to obey God’s will that we should love him and one another above all else. But instead, we often follow our own selfish path, opposed to the way of God. Human self-will takes its most dreadful form in the hatred and destruction of others. But Jesus did the will of God the Father by proclaiming a kingdom of love – love for everyone, not just the officially religious, not just those that one happens to like, but love for everyone.

In those wonderful words we have heard again today as hung on the cross, words rarely heard in our hate-filled world, Jesus prayed even for those who were crucifying him: “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing!” On the cross, Christ, love incarnate, defeated sin forever, reversing the age-old law of hatred. He revealed the universal love of God.

Finally, Christ our King struggled with the last and worst enemy of all - death itself – but emerged triumphant. Today’s Gospel depicts him dying on the cross. What followed was the long dark night of passing over from death to new life at Easter. It was on that first Easter morning, raised from the dead by his Father’s glory, that Jesus revealed himself to be the victorious king. Through his death and resurrection, Christ our Lord, life incarnate, defeated death forever and won eternal life for us. Having submitted himself totally to God – “Into your hands I commend my spirit” - the Father vindicated his cause.

That is what we celebrate today in this festival, the threefold victory of Christ our King:

- His slaying of untruth
- His slaying of hatred
- His slaying even of death.

We celebrate this mystery of salvation every time we celebrate the Eucharist. But we celebrate today in a special way, as we stand at the threshold of Advent and await Christ’s return in glory.

Brothers and sisters, we are not living in the era of the dictators when this feast first began to be celebrated. But the three enemies defeated by Christ, are still at work in our world. He has indeed won the definitive victory, but the mopping-up operation is still being accomplished. That is where we come in as Christ’s disciples. He asks us to take part in the advancement of his kingdom because:

- Lies have not gone away. Fake news, falsehood and misreports abound and proliferate in our media-driven society. The world needs more than ever

the luminous truth of Christ. Every time we proclaim that truth his kingdom advances.

- Selfishness and hatred have not gone away. The evils of racism, misogyny, slavery and the exploitation of others are very much with us. The world needs more than ever the selfless love of Christ. Every time we fulfill his commandment to love, his kingdom advances.
- Nor has death's power gone away. It is still at loose, destroying the lives of others. The world needs more than ever the eternal life that only Christ can give. Every time we offer that life to others, his kingdom advances.

On this great festival of his kingship, as we watch the parade of contemporary tinpot dictators - elected or unelected - striding daily across our television screens, may the image of Christ our crucified King, fill our hearts; may we commit ourselves increasingly to the advancement of his truth, love and life; and may his kingdom come through us, in our words and works of mercy.

As we sing in a much-loved hymn:

"So be it Lord, thy throne shall never,  
like earth's proud empires pass away.  
Thy kingdom stands and grows forever,  
till all thy creatures own thy sway."