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Sunday next before Advent The Festival of Christ the King

Welcome on the day when we celebrate the Kingship of Jesus! I like that. During the long weeks of Trinity, we have followed the story of Jesus. We have seen Him at work in His various miracles. We have shared some of His teaching as He walked and talked with His disciples.
We have formed a picture of Him in our own minds, as somebody very concerned for us and the way we live, and as someone who is available to us as guide, protector, and personal friend. Tradition has wrapped those qualities in the idea of Kingship - not the kind of stuffy monarchy, but the quiet, gentle, getting-alongside approach which doesn't command or give orders, but rather seeks to understand and, where possible, to put things right.

We probably remember photographs of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth visiting London's East End during the Blitz and sharing the grief and sadness caused by those events. The impact of their visit was immeasurable, not just on the East Enders, but on the country at large. People felt they were like the rest of us.  Exposed to the dangers of those days, they came over as down to earth, ordinary folk, and yet
wanting to give all the help they could through the office of state they held in the country. And, of course, using their high office, they helped and encouraged those who had lost their loved ones and members of their families.

Many of them were still living in the castle precincts at Windsor in my time there. and just down the road a new village of Eton Wick had been built for those who had lost their homes in the East End of London. The care of those people was added to my job in the Castle, and I remember many of them with great affection. The royals had become their friends, and, for their part, the East Enders had taken them to their hearts. We will have seen that kind of relationship before in our lives. It is the close, special relationship which characterises our country, and which the new set of young royals today seem eager to encourage.

In the same way, our Lord was very close to His disciples, and yet had an even closer relationship with His Father. The prince-subject relationship, which we see often in the news today or indeed in real life, helped rather than hindered the relationship with His friends.
That very special relationship was understood by the writer of the fourth gospel when he shows us Jesus and Pilate together. Presumably, our Lord was dressed in His working tunic as a Rabbi. By contrast, Pilate would be wearing clothing and ornaments which made it clear that he was a petty King but working with the authority of Caesar, and with a large measure of freedom, which included the power to order a death sentence or release a prisoner. The weight of office sat heavily on him and he comes over to the reader as a little man, who is not quite sure of himself in public office. He will do his best to represent the Roman emperor, but when he is reminded that, as a ruler, he has the power of life and death, he wilts and becomes fearful for himself.

So, we can make up our own minds if we read John chapter 18 onwards. We will get the feel of the play on words between Jesus and Pilate, and we can see how very different their views were on Kingship.
In matters of life and death Pilate becomes tentative. and less certain of his authority.
The priests knew this weakness in petty officials. "If you release this man whom we have brought to you for judgement, you are not Caesar's friend." That frightened Pilate. He had to be seen to be doing all the right things - things that belonged to imperial and kingly office.  That concern for himself and for his relationship with the boss, was his weakness and the chink in his armour. The chief priests and lawyers were wily. They could play Pilate as they wished, and from the professional point of view they could take cover under passages of scripture and prophecy, which had already spoken of Jesus being crucified.

It's worth reading the story of Jesus and Pilate, and putting yourself in the picture as someone standing by, rather like a servant, and hearing it all, as it were, at first hand. Jesus talks about His followers as being concerned for truth. That is a crucial moment, a kind of turning point in the discussion. To quote Francis Bacon in his essay, ‘Of Truth’, "What is truth?” said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer.” Pilate was getting uneasy in this conversation with Jesus. Truth was a difficult subject, though a very proper one for leaders, as we can see in the Brexit talks today. Pilate couldn’t cope with the idea of a kingdom of truth. He says," So you are a king then." Pilate is getting confused.

Jesus comes back at him and asks, "Are you saying so or did someone tell it to you about me?” Jesus tries to help him: "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight."

Pilate gives up. He can't get anywhere which makes sense to him. Better perhaps to give in to the Jewish hierarchy and let them deal with it. So, matters proceed as they had been long forecast in scripture. But it shows the two notions of Kingship: Pilate vested with the trappings of kingship and carrying out the orders of the Roman emperor; Jesus, in His humanity, trying to be helpful to everyone, including someone trying to find him guilty where there was no crime.

So, today we begin to think about the kingship of Jesus. His kingship is a friendly relationship with all those who accept Him as Lord of their lives.
Perhaps today we can renew that sense of friendly kingship and remember that He is always close to us, always working for our good, and always wishing us the qualities of that relationship - inner peace and goodwill, the strong support of His being with us when we feel at odds with all around us or, maybe, out on a limb. Above all, remember that from being close to Him there is a sense of joy which, like so many of the gifts of the Spirit, comes and goes but never gives up on us.
Remember these words of an old Scottish preacher who said, "Joy is the flag flown from the citadel of the heart when the King is in residence." These are the most important words I can give you today. Treasure them. Hold them close to you when you feel down or just out of sorts. Your heart is your citadel. Invite the King to take up residence. Remember joy is the flag which will fly there when the King is at home in your heart.
May your joy be a delight and overflowing. That is my wish for each one of us here, as we keep the festival of Christ the King today.