

**Archbishop Thabo Makgoba**  
**‘Pontifical High Mass’ – St Michael’s Observatory**  
**20 November 2011;**

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This Sermon for the Feast of Christ the King, was preached at a ‘Pontifical High Mass’ at the Church of St Michael and All Angels, Observatory, Cape Town, on 20 November 2011. The Mass was sung to Haydn’s Missa Sancti Nicolai, with additional music by Edward Elgar and from Handel’s Messiah. The readings were those set for ‘The Coming of the Kingdom of God,’ on pp.389ff of the Southern African Book of Common Prayer: Colossians 1:12-20; John 18:33-37.

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, let me again say what a pleasure it is to be with you. It is a pleasure also to welcome you, Dean Michael Weeder, to this service. Thank you, Fr Richard Girdwood and Wardens, for your invitation, and thank you to everyone who has contributed to this morning’s service: whether through participating or as one of the many unsung heroes and heroines behind the scenes. Let me also at this point congratulate Fr Richard on his appointment by the Minister of Arts and Culture to South Africa’s Heraldry Council. This is wonderful news! Let us offer him a round of applause.

Today, on the last Sunday before Advent, the Anglican world observes the Feast of Christ the King.

This postdates the Book of Common Prayer, so Fr Richard has been creative in proposing the readings set there for ‘the coming of the Kingdom of God’. And in fact our Epistle today is one which is set every third year within the Revised Common Lectionary.

The objective is the same – to help us reflect upon the coming of God’s kingdom, and the coming of Christ as King of kings and Lord of Lords, both in this world, and for all eternity.

Pope Pius XI first instituted this commemoration, in 1925, in response to the growing nationalism and secularism he perceived in the years following the First World War.

In Italy, the Fascists, under Mussolini, were increasingly influential, and the Pope realised that both the faithful and the wider world should be regularly reminded that ultimate power of every sort lies in the hands of God, and allegiance to him overrules all other claims on our loyalties.

Following a decision of Pope Paul VI in 1969, the Feast has been observed on the last Sunday of the church calendar, and has increasingly been adopted by Anglicans and others.

This is with good reason – for the need remains both to proclaim that Jesus is Lord of all; and, furthermore, to insist that all legitimate power and rule are to be exercised and understood according to the model of Christ our King.

Both the wider world and the church itself need to be reminded of such truths.

Three weeks ago I came the closest I have ever been to preaching to a king, when the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall came to St George's Cathedral!

By chance, the lectionary had set for our Old Testament reading a passage in which the prophet Amos warned the leadership of Jerusalem that all their religious observances – no matter how fine – were worse than useless and brought only judgement, if they were not matched by holy living and the pursuit of righteousness and justice.

As we sat in the splendour of the Cathedral, with wonderful music uplifting our liturgy, it was a salutary warning to the church also.

And I guess the same must be said today, in the magnificence of this pontifical mass. However much we adore Christ as King, with all the trappings of majesty and might, we must also follow him faithfully – as the one who emptied himself of the glories of heaven; the one who came not to be served but to serve and to lay down his life for his friends; the one who calls us all to take up our crosses and follow after him.

As Pilate was perplexed to hear – as our Gospel reading recounted – Jesus' kingship is very counter-cultural to the expectations and standards of the world.

For on the one hand, he is a far greater King than any human monarch.

He cannot be relegated to some constitutional figurehead with limited engagement in the daily running of his realm. All power and majesty and might are his.

Yet the exercise of his sovereign rule bears no resemblance to even the most powerful absolute head of state.

For, if Jesus truly is the ruler of all, we might ask how it is that so much of the

world seems out of step with the kingdom of God – from the sinfulness of humanity to the levels of suffering unconnected with human malpractice.

It doesn't seem to point to a very effective kingship. And indeed, at no point does Jesus ever force us to follow his rule.

But the answer lies with the second counter-cultural aspect of Jesus' rule – that of the suffering servant who lays down his life for his people.

This is the subversive kingship who does not confront the powers of the world by overcoming them with greater strength.

Rather evil is to be overcome by good, those who are prepared to give up their lives will gain life immortal, our enemies are to be loved, and the few cents that the poor widow gives add up to far, far more than the large donation made from the surplus of the wealthy man.

(Though having said this, let me not undermine the generous giving of sums both large and small to St Michael's Stewardship campaign, which I understand concludes today! All that we give to the Lord's work is valued and used by him, of that I am sure!)

So the question with which we are posed, when considering the coming of God's kingdom, in this world and the world to come, is this: what does it mean for each of us to live as citizens of the kingdom of God?

What does it mean for us to be not so much 'proudly South African' as 'proudly Jesus people'?

For certainly, we should bear our allegiance to him with pride, and not be ashamed to call him Lord!

And while rugby or cricket or football can call us to sport our green and gold shirts, or rainbow scarves, we can demonstrate our loyalty in many ways, not just, for example, through dog collars or crosses and 'What Would Jesus Do?' bracelets.

Through our lives, our actions, our words, our attitudes, there are two messages we want to proclaim.

First is the challenge to anything else that tries to claim our primary allegiance.

This may come in many forms – we might use the broad terminology of

idolatry.

This can span both the public and private sphere.

So, for example, Christians say loud and clear – as Pope Pius XI intended in creating this feast – that any ideology, from secularism to nationalism, from the claims of any political party, or economic theory, or philosophy of life – it must all come second to the kingdom of God.

Furthermore, since God is God of all of life, all of creation, there is no part of human activity that can fall outside his interest. This means that it is for us to critique every area of life, according to Christian principles – to the standards of the Kingdom.

Idolatry also extends to money – though remember that Scripture does not say that money itself is the root of all evil, but that love of money is the problem.

Money, and what it can buy, can be very seductive. But we should not be afraid of it and should learn to use it wisely.

There was a banner at the Occupy Wall Street protests that put it well: 'You don't have to be poor to be good, you don't have to be rich to be bad, but you have to be fair to be right.'

Idolatry can come in other forms, in our private lives, and includes any sort of addictive behaviour – not just alcohol or drugs.

There may be other aspects of our lifestyle that have an unhealthy hold on us.

These might include our attitudes to others and ways we speak about people, and perhaps even exploit them.

It may be that we have a superiority complex, seeing ourselves as something of a 'king'; or the reverse, an inferiority complex where we always want to please others as if they were 'kings'.

Or it may be our self-image, our good name, our status, the opinions of others, that we most care about – vanity and pride.

Our sexuality and how we express it can also become idolatrous, especially in a world that over sexualises so much and promotes promiscuity, pornography, and the objectification of other people for our own gratification.

But, whatever it is that we battle with, thanks be to God, he does not just tell us to put him first – he helps us! By the power of the Spirit dwelling within us, if we ask him, he will help us place every aspect of our lives under his rule.

And the second message we have to proclaim is that God's ways are best – the way of peace and love and honesty and truth.

The story of the widow's mite tells us that even the smallest acts of compassion and kindness bear unimaginable value in God's scales; and what might seem insignificant lives, if lived through his love, can have consequences that will make their mark on eternity.

To be a proud citizen of the kingdom of God, we do not need to make a big splash. We just need to be faithful and obedient, in our own context, in whatever are the circumstances of our lives.

Let us therefore, in this Eucharist, be conscious of offering ourselves to God as his loyal citizens, as followers of Jesus Christ.

We come to his table, with our hands open to present ourselves, wholly without reserve, in his service – and open to receive whatever he gives to us: both his bread for the journey, and the path on which he calls us forward.

Yes, today we celebrate the coming of the kingdom of God – the kingdom of the one who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and we remember the words of Jesus to Pilate:

'Everyone who belongs to the truth, listens to my voice.'

May we be those who listen, and follow faithfully. May it be so. Amen.