

Christ the King

(James Parsons, 22nd November 2020)

Ezekiel 34.11-16, 20-24, (Psalm 95.1-7; Ephesians 1.15-end) and Matthew 25.31-end

Eternal God, whose Son Jesus Christ ascended to the throne of heaven that he might rule over all things as Lord and King: keep the whole Church in the unity of the Spirit and in the bond of peace, and bring the whole created order to worship at his feet; who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. Amen.

A TV series that Julia and I enjoy watching is BBC's "Who do you think you are?" You may have seen it. If not, or as a reminder, it's about celebrities tracing their family trees; lost connections and unfamiliar histories are revealed. They discover stories of courage, joy, sacrifice and resilience.

My favourite episode is with four-time Olympic gold medallist Matthew Pinsent. He traced his family back to the first world war, on back to the Napoleonic wars, even back to William Howard, uncle of Katherine Howard, fifth wife of Henry VIII.

It didn't stop there. William Howard was descended from Edward I, who, in turn, was descended from William the Conqueror.

It didn't stop there either! I remember when Matthew, already astounded, watched as a beautiful medieval scroll, created at a time when kings claimed to have divine right to govern, was unrolled. On the basis of that claim, the scroll showed the relationship of British monarchy to Jesus, King David, Adam and Eve and even to God.

These days ancestry websites and tracing your family tree has become a popular pastime. You may have done it yourself, or you know someone else interested in exploring their family history this way.

If so, what a wonderful way of introducing them to Jesus through the Gospel of Matthew.

Why? The Gospel starts with a family tree, the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham (1:1). Joseph, Jesus' earthly dad, descends from King David – this was the reason Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem, for the census required that the people returned to the town of their family's origin.

What follows next is a "Who do you think you are?" moment.

After the family tree we have the story of the Magi, or three wise men as our Christmas carol suggests, who seek the king of the Jews. This prompts the wrath of Herod. It's as if Herod shouts, "Who do you think you are?" He's not prepared to concede his throne to anyone and, in his rage, has all the young boys born in and around Bethlehem slaughtered. You can read what happens in Matthew ch 2.

Today is the last Sunday of the church calendar. Over the last year we have followed, except for a detour with our "Called to be" series, the Gospel of Matthew. This Sunday is the Feast of Christ the King. So, I thought it would be useful to look back over Matthew's Gospel and see how Christ the King fits in with what Matthew says.

Donald Bridges, in his book *Why four Gospels?*¹ suggests the theme of kingship as a useful outline for the whole of Matthew's Gospel.

Bridges offers a simple and memorable outline each with its easily spotted core text.

Prologue: *The Man born to be King* (chapters 1-2) that I've referred to above.

"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" (2:2)

Part 1: *The Good News of the kingdom* (chapters 3-9) – Jesus is anointed and acknowledged at his baptism. He announces his manifesto with the Sermon on the Mount.

"Theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:3)

¹ Donald Bridges, *Why Four Gospels?* (Ross-shire, Mentor, 1996) pp. 67-69

Part 2: *Ambassadors of the kingdom* (chapters 10-12) – Jesus sends out his evangelists.

“Preach this message – the kingdom of heaven is near” (10:7)

Part 3: *The Secrets of the kingdom* (chapters 13-16) – Jesus uses parables to describe his rule, and ever more openly offers himself as the heart of the message.

“The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom has been given to you” (13:11)

At what is the turning point of this Gospel (16:13-28) Jesus challenges the crowds and his disciples with the question of his own identity – “Who do you say I am?” to which Peter replies, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (16:16).

Part 4: *The Progress of the King* (chapters 17-20) – Owned by words from God when in transfigured glory, Jesus continues to teach and heal, but with two increased emphases: he must suffer, and his followers are called to a changed life.

(God says) “This is my Son. Listen to him.” (17:5)

Part 5: *The Passion of the King* (chapters 21-28) – Jesus enters Jerusalem with obvious Messianic symbolism (especially Jesus riding the donkey).

“See, your king comes to you.” (21:5)

For a dramatic week he confronts the religious leaders with their false values. Infuriated, they arrest him. He’s brought before the high priest and then before Pilate. It’s as if, once again, Jesus is confronted with the question, “Who do you think you are?”

The high priest asks, “Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” Pilate, the governor, asks, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

Jesus replies, “Yes, it is as you say.”

Jesus is crucified. The Roman power puts a charge above his head: “THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS.” (27:37)

Epilogue: *The Man with Authority* (chapter 28) – Christ is raised from the dead. Or as Tom Wright puts it, “God has raised Jesus from the dead, so vindicating the implicit messianic claims of his earlier ministry.”² Jesus commissions his followers, and by extension this includes you and me, to teach and convert the nations with his authority.

“All authority ... has been given to me ... go and make disciples.” (28:19-20)

In many places in the Gospel Jesus is challenged with, “Who do you think you are?”

Now Jesus challenges us, “Who do you say I am?”

I wonder, have you thought about what your answer is?

And I wonder, have you thought about what difference Jesus as Christ the King will make to how you live your life?

I want to end with the words from the hymn sung earlier.

Let’s use this as a prayer.

So let us learn how to serve and in our lives enthrone Him.
Each other’s needs to prefer, for it is Christ we’re serving.

This is our God, the Servant King, He calls us now to follow Him,
to bring our lives as a daily offering of worship to the Servant King.

Amen

² Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone – Part 2* (London, SPCK, 2002) p.219