



# *Feast of Christ the King*

## *Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright*



20 November 2022

### READINGS

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 1:68-79 (replace the Psalm); Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

*“They crucified Jesus with the criminals,  
one on his right and one on his left.”*

Greetings Friends. With each liturgical cycle, it can be challenging to come up with new and novel things to say, particularly on the major feast days. And I find this with the feast of Christ the King. I feel as though I invariably end up saying some of the same things every year: Christ the King marks the end and culmination of our liturgical calendar; it celebrates Christ’s universal reign over all creation; it may be contrasted with Palm Sunday, on which we also see Jesus as king, but a different kind of king; we could ask ourselves the question – what really is the quality and character of Christ’s rule and of kingdom?

In the past though, particularly for Palm Sunday and Christ the king, I have considered some of the messianic and eschatological beliefs attendant to the culture of Jesus’ day. This at least shows us what some of the popular beliefs and expectations were as to what a Jewish king or Messiah would look like. An article I read recently said that there is a tradition within Rabbinic Judaism based on a passage in Zechariah 1 which refers to “four craftsmen”, or tradesmen. Incidentally, in the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament) the word used is tekton, which can mean builder or carpenter, the same word used to refer to Jesus’ supposed profession. But the tradition within the Talmud (the authoritative text for Rabbinic Judaism) says that these four craftsmen who are prophesied in Zechariah refer to four Messiahs.

The four Messiahs were supposed to be Elijah (returned), Messiah ben Joseph, Messiah ben David, and the Righteous Priest. Each of these four Messiahs had unique features and functions. The returned Elijah was supposed to be the herald of Messiah ben Joseph, Messiah ben Joseph (also referred to as Messiah ben Ephraim, or Messiah son of Ephraim, i.e. of the tribe of Ephraim) was supposed to be the suffering Messiah, or suffering servant referred to in the book of Isaiah. The Messiah ben David, as the name suggests was meant to be a kingly Messiah in the mould and fashion of David, while the role of the righteous priest was related to that of Messiah ben David though he was meant to be subordinate to Messiah ben David.

Now this may sound both familiar and foreign to us because arguably some of these roles and attributes we associate, or have associated, with Jesus, whom Christians obviously take to be the Messiah. What is strange is to hear of this tradition within Judaism in which there were at least four Messiahs who would come at different times and independently. This explains why, at Passover, Jews have the custom of

keeping a seat open for Elijah, since they are awaiting his return. Jesus himself, as we know, is supposed to have said in the Gospels that John the Baptist actually was the returned Elijah.

Now I mention this article to highlight the plethora of messianic and eschatological beliefs attendant to the Judaism of Jesus' day. And apart from this tradition of the four Messiah's there was belief in other eschatological figures. There were traditions around the Son of Man, there were traditions around Moses, there were traditions around Enoch, there were traditions around someone known as the Prophet.

If one delves into some of the beliefs of Rabbinic Judaism, it becomes really quite strange. For example, the prophet Elijah, because he supposedly never died, but was translated to heaven by whirlwind was ambiguous. But as mentioned, this seems to have been almost universally accepted. According to Rabbinic Judaism though, once in heaven Elijah was, at some point, transformed into the angel Sandalphon. In like fashion, because there was a tradition around Enoch, the fact that he also did not die but was assumed into heaven, was transformed into the angel Metatron, Sandalphon's twin brother.

Now all of this becomes a bit heady and bewildering. Let us remember that these are beliefs specific to Rabbinic Judaism. It is nevertheless insightful to understand not just Jesus' ministry and mission in light of this, but his enduring and universal reign, which is what we are marking and celebrating today.

In drawing things to a close, the image we are presented with most starkly in today's Gospel reading is that of Jesus on the cross hung between two criminals with a sign above his head designating him as the king of the Jews. As we have mentioned many times before this does not align with any conventional criteria for a king, nor indeed does the image of his entry into Jerusalem on a donkey – the predominating image on Palm Sunday, nor undoubtedly did it align with many of the personal and popular expectations which people might have had at the time for a (Davidic) messiah.

While it is true that Luke's version uses the word directly translated as criminal or wrongdoer, Jesus in fact was crucified between two bandits. We need not revisit the detail of the difference between a banditry and petty theft, the point perhaps for Luke is that, together with these wrongdoers, Jesus is deemed an outlaw. He finds himself literally outside the bounds of Jewish Torah, and therefore outside of the bounds of salvation, for salvation and righteousness, within the Jewish context, are mediated by Torah. Paul highlights this fact in Galatians 3:13 when he says "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us. For it is written cursed is everyone hung on a tree" where he quotes Deuteronomy.

It seems then by all accounts that Christ's kingly office is most unconventional and contrary to popular conception. What is often emphasised by contemplative writers is the Paschal Mystery, the inherent mystery and paradox contained within the Passion of Jesus. The path of descent becomes the path of ascent, and the path of ascent becomes the path of descent. In the Gospel of John, Jesus' hour of glory is the hour of the Passion. And his being lifted up from the earth is his being lifted up on the cross. However, we wish to classify the kingly office and reign of Christ, Christ takes on our accursedness, thereby winning himself true blessedness, which we in turn may partake of. Amen.