

Christ the King, 2016

One of our more unattractive features as a nation is the way we like to laugh at the Americans or indeed sometimes to scorn them. Let us count the ways:

They need extra wide seats on aeroplanes, as they stuff their faces with super size meals and fizzy drinks.

Half of them believe that God made the world in seven days, and that evolution is a hoax.

They managed to choose Donald Trump to be their president, despite all that's wrong with him *and* more people actually voting for Hillary Clinton.

They are ludicrously patriotic. It's even a little sinister. They go so far as to make their children stand up, at the beginning of every day, and swear allegiance to the flag:

"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

Can you imagine British children doing that? Or even many British teachers doing that? There would be sniggers, there would be embarrassment, there would be lots of self-questioning doubt about how great Britain actually is and complaining about all the other things our flag has stood for: racism, militarism, the class system, Empire, invading Iraq. We're *far* too grown up and sophisticated for a Pledge of Allegiance.

Well, as with many of the things we laugh at the Americans for, I'm not entirely sure that we've got that particular piece of condescension quite right. Of course it is possible to be too patriotic, and too uncritical of one's nation.... but it is also possible to be too *unpatriotic*, too cynical about one's fellow people and our collective history, too ready to run everything down, and, if you're not very careful, to end up taking nothing more seriously than one's own private preferences and interests. At least the American child is taught he or she is part of a common project, something bigger and noble, something worth contributing to – even perhaps, dying for. There is, for the American, emphatically such a thing as society.

Anyway, on this feast of Christ the King, the point about the Pledge of Allegiance is a simple one. If you would like to learn how to begin praying outside of church, during the week, the Pledge is a really good place to start. It is certainly much better than one of the worst pieces of advice on prayer I ever heard from the pulpit. The preacher said that prayer was a bit like coming in and sitting down by the fire with your best friend, kicking off your shoes and having what the preacher called 'a good old natter' with Jesus. Now, I try to make allowances for the fact that everyone's spiritual life is different, and that different things work for different people, and I realise that I may err too much in the other direction – but basically, the natter theory of prayer is spectacularly misleading. It's not what prayer actually feels like for most people, and it doesn't even describe what *should* be going on. Jesus is not your invisible best friend. You do not 'natter' to him, and He does not natter back. And if that is your usual or primary experience of prayer, I'd dare to suggest you are missing something really serious about your relationship to Him. Jesus is not your best mate. He is your King. And so the proper way to start talking to Him is on your knees – ideally, really, physically on your knees – and pledging your allegiance.

Here's how you might do it: 'Lord Jesus, here I am. Be my King. I give you my service: my mind, my heart, my will, my body, every part of me; all my relationships, all my thinking, all my actions – in all of them may I do your will. May your majesty shape everything about me, may my life respond to your summons.' Pray something like that slowly every day, ask God to show you what it means and gradually shape your life according to it – and at the very least, you will have made an excellent start in being Christian. There is indeed a lot more to prayer, but that first, basic, daily pledge of allegiance is right at the heart of the matter. And note, please, you do not have to be a spiritual giant to do that. You do not have to be able to sit quietly and focussed in silence for half an hour, you do not have to hear God talking back all the time, or even have a very clear idea who God is. You simply need to be serious about bowing the knee. God will take it from there.

That's the first point for a Christ the King sermon. The second – and you'll be glad to know that today there only are two – is this. Jesus is King in a very unusual way. Most human kingship – most human *power*, if you like – is ultimately about the ability to use force and to kill people. Think, historically, how most of our monarchs got there – they got there by fighting off their rivals, and being strong enough (for most of history *violent* enough) to keep the country quiet beneath them. Even our own current monarchy, and Her Majesty's Government, is in the end about *force* and violence. Now, you may think that Elizabeth Windsor is a lovely lady, who would no more use violence than ride a skateboard in church. You may even think that that nice Teresa May wouldn't hurt anyone. But actually, even in countries like ours, the ultimate reason we have a government is because we know that left to ourselves, not enough of us would bother paying our taxes, or looking after our neighbour, or putting the common interest above our own private ones. Somebody needs to stop most of us from being selfish, and to stop us from fighting. And that person needs the power to *make* people do things, and if they won't to punish them – to *take* their goods, to *take* their liberty. If the churchwardens and I suddenly have a punch up in the street, the policeman – ultimately – needs the power to take his Taser out and stop us. The State, the Crown, has what is sometimes called the legitimate monopoly of force. We have kings and queens, governments and police forces because we need someone to *make us* do things. It is the way the world works. Back in Jesus' time, or today, it is the way of Caesar.

Now, Jesus will not do this. He does not *make* people do things. He does not do force. In him, there is no violence at all. That is why His kingship is first publicly declared when He is on the Cross – as the *victim* of human power. Jesus Christ does not force: rather he allows himself to be forced – to be nailed up on a cross and to be killed. And when his followers plead with Him not to let this happen, to fight back, to meet force with bigger force, he rebukes them. 'He who lives by the sword, shall die by the sword' Don't you realise there are legions of angels that could swoop in right now, and end all this, take Pilate and Caesar and toss them aside? – but that is not the way. That is not my Kingship. That is not how I will bring justice and make peace, that is not how *this* Kingship, the one true Kingship, works.

It works rather on the Cross. All the Gospels agree that that above Christ's cross there was a placard: 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.' The Roman Empire was making its point – we've got the swords, so there is no King but Caesar. And if you think otherwise, this is where you'll end. And yet for the Evangelist, it is a simple statement of the truth: the one who hangs on the Cross is the King. The Cross is his throne. The Cross is where he reigns, and brings justice and peace. The ultimate power in the universe is not in the end to do with the ability to use force and kill people. It's here on the Cross, in this moment of love and surrender and sacrifice. This is the key that will unlock everything, this is the deed which in the end will make all things come right. This the thing that will save everyone, even the desperate thief dying beside Jesus, a wicked and violent criminal. Human kingship could only kill him; Jesus' kingship will raise Him up. This is the deed we gather around at the Eucharist, to drink it in and receive its power.

Now all this is one great big statement of faith. If you are a Christian, you are saying that despite all the evidence to the contrary, you do *not* believe that force is at the heart of everything. You do *not* believe that in the end, might is right. You do not believe that the way to peace and justice and happiness lies through violence – however we dress it up. You're saying rather that it all happens here on the Cross of Jesus. Here is where true power lies. Here is the throne. And when you kneel before this throne, when you pledge allegiance to this King, you're saying you will shape your life after His way. That you will renounce the ways of Caesar, however they are dressed up. That in the big things of public life, and in the small things of family and home, you will have nothing to do with violence. That your life will be like your King's life, poured out in peace, in love, in sacrifice. Pray that slowly, deeply, daily – make that pledge again and again and again, and over time He will show you what it must mean, and make you fit to keep it.