

Christ the King: Spark 2024

"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."

That's what American school children stand up and swear on a regular basis, some even daily.

Can you imagine trying to make that happen here? 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. 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, 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 something big and noble, a common project worth contributing to – even perhaps, dying for. There is, for the American, emphatically such a thing as society.

However, I mention it today because if you want to know how to pray, 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 'a good old natter' with Jesus. Now, different things work for different people, and I may err too much in the other direction – but basically, the natter theory of prayer is spectacularly misleading. Jesus is not your invisible best friend. You do not 'natter' to him, and He does not natter back. He is not your best mate. He is your King. And so the proper way to start talking to Him is on your knees – ideally, literally 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.

That's the first point for a Christ the King sermon.

The second is this. Jesus is King in a very unusual way. Most human kingship 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. And even in modern times, and even in Republics, the ultimate reason we have a government is because we need someone to *make* us do things. Somebody needs to stop us from being selfish, and stop us fighting. And that somebody needs the power to do so – the *force* to do so. If you and I suddenly have a punch up in the street, the policeman – ultimately – needs the power to take his Taser out and stop us. Ultimately, the State gets to use force. It is the way the world works. Back in Jesus' time, or today, it is the way of Caesar.

Jesus will not do this. 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 how I will bring justice and make peace, that is not how my 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 all 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 the ability to use force and kill people. It's here on the Cross, it is 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.

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 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.