

Christ the King – A Reversal of Values

William Loader

For some, the celebration of Christ the King is indeed a reversal of values. Now glory and honour and power where once was humiliation and shame. *Per angusta ad augusta*, through hardship to glory. Christ becomes a symbol of human ambition, a model of triumph. Too often this implies also: leaving lowliness and love behind. Duty is done; now the reward. Now to enjoy glory and seek it ever after from others and worse: inflict retribution and pain on those who fail to bow – a reversal of values, indeed.



Was Easter a reversal of values? A stint of love concluded? A return to the norms of glory and exaltation to which that year or three was an exception? Or was it God's affirmation that this was not a stunt, a brief episode of grace and mercy? What if Jesus was not an exception in the life of God but, on the contrary, a revelation of who and how God is? The reversal of values was not Jesus changing his mind nor God's retreat to aloofness, but a confrontation of popular human models of kingship, a challenge to human ambition for glory and honour which makes God in its image.

The language of kingship belonged to faith's tradition. It embodied ambiguity. At worst it made God a tyrant obsessed with adulation, but at best it envisioned caring leadership and embraced the ancient image of kings as shepherds. Jesus affirmed the latter and did the same with images of father, not to say that this was exceptional but that it was and is how God is.

For Jesus, himself, this vulnerability ended on a cross, mocked as would-be "King of the Jews", but to the eyes of faith profoundly so. The first believers, who hailed him as king indeed and Messiah/Christ to come, called to God's right hand at his resurrection, looked to his return to flesh out that leadership of love. Framed as a national hope, however, it had limited appeal for non-Jews, and Christ, over time, became like a surname, but the vision of love remained.

While never lost and ever dangerous, king-centred language, came to be eclipsed by the image of Wisdom and Word. This profound Jewish image, less troubled by the kingship model's ambiguities, had more universal appeal and kept love well alive. Wisdom, sometimes playfully depicted as the soul's lover, became faith's source for affirming love and hailed Jesus as Wisdom/Word incarnate.

A softer image, it helped faith see Jesus in new ways, not as an exception in the life of God nor as now along with God obsessed with seeking adulation, the worst outcomes of the kingship model, but as standing in the tradition of making God known. It so became the lens through which to see "Christ the King" as a reversal of the values which that image can so easily perpetuate. As the hymn puts it. "The king of love my shepherd is whose goodness faileth never".