

26th November 2023 – Reflection: Colossians 1:15-29 ‘Christ the King’

I wonder if some of you, like me, enjoy a good walk at Stowe. For those of you who haven't discovered Stowe, it's a lovely area of parkland near Buckingham designed by Capability Brown – you can walk for miles around the estate, all in the sight of the enormous stately home, which is now a famous school. But it wasn't always a school – in years gone by it was the home of the Dukes of Buckingham.

In fact, one of the reasons it's a school *now* goes back to the time of the 2nd Duke, the hubristically named Richard Temple-Nugent-Brydges-Chandos-Grenville – and anyone who has not just a double-barrelled or triple-barrelled surname but a quintuple-barrelled surname is bound to get themselves into trouble, sooner or later. Duke Richard – let's leave the surname out of it, I doubt I'll manage to say it again – was something of a wild and unpredictable character, rather notorious in his day. He was immensely ambitious, and, succeeding his father in 1839 with a vast estate and one of the largest incomes in the country, like many of the nobility, was desperate for Stowe to host a royal visit. This he finally achieved in 1845, when Queen Victoria came to stay.

It was, however, to prove his undoing. Duke Richard spent so much money upgrading what was already a massive and marvellous residence to show off to the monarch that he bankrupted the estate. His financial ruin in 1847 caused a national scandal. He just about kept hold of Stowe by selling his other estate in Somerset and auctioning off the contents of Stowe itself, but it was downhill all the way from there.

Such are the risks of having the monarch to stay – and if you're a National Trust member and visit lots of the stately homes of this country you'll see how often a bedroom is dedicated solely to the memory of a monarch – the Queen Anne room, the King George room and so on. Despite the risks, such also is the mystical power of a royal visit.

Today in the church's calendar, and always the week before Advent starts, is the feast of Christ the King – and so it's natural that we conclude our 'Good News' Autumn series by thinking about Christ the King. It's a fitting way to end, because it is the best news of all. The Lord, whom we worship and follow, is not just a loving friend, a wonderful Saviour and a perfect example, but has all the authority in the universe. His victory over the things that destroy humanity – sin, Satan, suffering and ultimately death – is assured precisely because he is the King of kings and Lord of lords. His vast home in heaven will one day be ours – indeed, heaven will join with earth in a gloriously renewed creation, which makes even Stowe look drab in comparison.

Our great passage for today makes the pre-eminent position of Jesus Christ abundantly clear. The Son, St Paul says, is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation (v15). He created all things, holds all things together, and even all the structures of power that exist – thrones, powers, rulers and authorities – were created ultimately to serve his purpose. Many of those powers quite obviously do not serve Jesus' purposes at present, but they're meant to – that's why they exist in the first place, Paul says.

Our God is a great big God – and today we celebrate that. But there's something even more remarkable in this fantastic passage in Colossians. Because Paul goes on to talk about how this great big God, this King of kings and Lord of lords, relates to us, his creatures.

He describes it as a great mystery, one that previous generations were not privileged to understand – but the mystery is this: Christ in you, the hope of glory (v27).

Very few of us ever receive a royal visit. Some of us may have seen our late queen or king but I'm pretty sure none of us have had them round to our house to stay. But **this King, Christ the King, comes to visit *all* of his followers. In fact, not only comes to visit; he comes to stay, to live with us, permanently.** Christ in you. Christ in me.

And he comes to us as we are. We don't have to bankrupt ourselves like Duke Richard just to have the monarch to stay for a night – because of the cross, because of the resurrection, because of Pentecost, the promise is for us and our children and for all who are far off – everyone who calls on the name of the Lord is not only saved, but receives a royal visit. We receive the gift of God's Holy Spirit – the King comes to live with us. Just take a moment to let that sink in – the King comes to live with us. Christ in you, the hope of glory.

For Duke Richard, the Queen coming to stay brought glory for a night or a weekend – but the visit of our King, King Jesus, brings the hope of *eternal* glory. God's plan is that we grow into this inheritance – he longs for each us to become 'fully mature in Christ'. The word 'mature' here means complete, the finished article. And it's what we will be, with Christ in glory. We have a long way to go here – but this is where we're heading, and thanks to the abiding presence of the King, one way or another we will get there. Hallelujah!

One final observation – there's a reason this feast of Christ the King is the week before Advent starts: because it points us forward. Next week we'll begin to prepare for the ultimate royal visit. The visit promised hundreds of years beforehand. The visit announced by angels. The Word becoming flesh and making his dwelling among us. Christ *among* us, the hope of glory.

But this visit was not to a grand home – the Roman equivalent of Stowe. This visit was to an unknown teenage girl, in an out-of-the-way town in an occupied territory. No servants or four poster beds, just animals and a manger. Our good news, the greatest royal visit of all, came almost unnoticed, except for those careful enough to look, and to believe.

As we draw this series to a close, let's remind ourselves of the two great truths of this passage: that we worship the King of kings, the one who is supreme over all things – but one who comes, incredibly, to live with us. As we prepare our hearts for the way of the Lord, for the arrival of the King, as we do every Advent, so may we grasp again the extraordinary mystery that the Almighty Creator comes to dwell *with us* – and even *in us*. This God is the One we proclaim – the greatest good news of all. Amen.