

I am sure that after this service, if you haven't already done so, you will be rushing home to make the Christmas puddings as today is Stir-up Sunday. Originally this was the reminder to make the puddings, putting in a coin so that the person who received it will have wealth throughout the coming year. That's if they don't break a tooth in the process! The real meaning of the day is to stir us up by asking God for the strength to do his will.

Today is the day we think about Christ the King. The reading from St John tells of the ending of the life of Christ. His time with the disciples has now finished; what he has taught them is now to be put into practice. But there is a long way to go; they have to watch him die the cruel death on the cross; most of them will already be feeling terrible as they have denied their Lord and run away from the challenge set by the authorities. The long journey from Bethlehem to Calvary is almost at an end. But we know that it is not the end.

Pilate asked Jesus, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Pilate was in a very important position as ruler of Palestine and must have previously proved his worth as an administrator. He needed to keep a very difficult area in order, especially as Palestine was the bridge between Syria and Egypt. However, as the ruler of Palestine, he had begun to be a failure and angered the people. He had refused to remove the image of the emperor from the standards carried by the soldiers and this was seen as a graven image and not to be tolerated by the Jews. Previous rulers had shown some sensitivity to the feelings of the Jews and did remove the image. Pilate was hounded and asked the people to meet him in the amphitheatre where he eventually surrounded them with soldiers and would have killed the people there. Expecting the people to give in, Pilate was amazed that the people would not capitulate. Even Pilate realised that he could not massacre a group of innocent people and he was the one who had to lose face.

On another occasion he raided the Temple treasury to build a new aqueduct to provide a better water supply to Jerusalem. This caused the people to riot so to quell this Pilate used plain clothes soldiers to kill them. Neither of these events endeared him to the people and he went on to compound the issue.

Not having learnt his lesson, Pilate had votive shields made which depicted Tiberius on the head. As the Emperor was regarded as a god and was worshipped, this did nothing to appease the Jews and they reported Pilate to the Roman Emperor who ordered the shields to be removed. Pilate must have been angry that his word was usurped!

Jesus was brought before him and he did not want to kill Jesus because he knew that the charges which the Jews had presented to him were not true. Because a charge of blasphemy would not hold out in Roman justice, Jesus was charged with rebellion and political insurrection. Pilate tried several ways to allow Jesus to be released but in the end the Jews blackmailed him by stating that "We have no king but Caesar." Pilate was afraid that he would be

reported again and would lose his job. He did not have the courage to stand up for what he believed was the truth and indeed asked “What is truth?” a question that has been debated by people through countless generations. It is interesting to note that the Jews committed blasphemy when they shouted that they had no king but Caesar!

Ideas of monarchy vary with different societies and are conferred either by inheriting the crown or by seizing it by violence. With Jesus it was neither of these ways. He started by being very popular with the people, because he healed and appeared to stand up to the Pharisees who made life so difficult for the poor people. But through this, Jesus made influential enemies and knew that they wanted to kill him and get rid of him in any way that they could. He was arrested on a dark night when there would be few people about and there would be little resistance from the illiterate band that followed him. And indeed they ran away.

Christ is the King for all eternity; he is a king who changes things; he is the King of love; he is our king. This often appears to be an incomprehensible thought and yet, as Tertullian said, "We believe because it is impossible". Christ walks with us at all times; he is present in every situation; he knows everything about us; he loves us in spite of what we are. In the first letter of John, it is written: "How great is the love the Father has lavished upon us, that we should be called the children of God." Christ is King and yet is available to each one. He is the King of love and opens his arms wide to receive us into that wonderful Kingdom. There is nothing that could be more wonderful than knowing that! Amen.