I speak to you in the name of our Creator, the Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit, the one who heals, restores, and transforms us. Amen.

Today is the final Sunday of the Church's liturgical year. Next Sunday we begin again, entering Advent and preparing for the birth of Christ. But before we turn towards the manger, the Church invites us to pause and consider something extraordinary: the Reign of Christ. We are invited to contemplate Christ as King, enthroned in glory and reigning over all creation. And yet, if we listen carefully to today's readings, we discover that this is not quite the sort of king we might expect. The kingdom of Christ turns many of our assumptions about power, authority, leadership and greatness completely upside down.

The Feast of Christ the King was established in 1925 by Pope Pius XI, at a time when Europe was still recovering from the devastation of the First World War, empires had collapsed, and political ideologies were competing for people's allegiance. Pius XI was concerned that governments were increasingly demanding an allegiance that properly belonged to God, and he established the feast to affirm that Christ, rather than any earthly ruler, political movement or nation, is the ultimate authority over human life. Originally celebrated in October, the feast was moved to this final Sunday before Advent after the Second Vatican Council, and other traditions, including Anglican churches, adopted it. About this time, it also started to be called alternatively the Reign of Christ Sunday.

For us, this Sunday is not simply about affirming that Jesus is King. It is about asking what kind of king Jesus is, what kind of kingdom he establishes, and what it means for us to belong to that kingdom. And there is a question we shouldn't avoid: does calling Christ King risk reinforcing the very imperialism,

domination and abuse of power that Christianity has sometimes supported? It is a legitimate concern. Christian history is not innocent in this regard. The language of Christ's kingship has sometimes been used to justify colonialism, conquest, forced conversion and the domination of other peoples. But I would suggest that today's readings offer us a very different understanding of kingship. Christ's reign does not imitate the kingdoms of this world. It challenges them.

Our first reading takes us back to the prophet Ezekiel, writing during one of the darkest periods in Israel's history. Jerusalem had been conquered by the Babylonians, the Temple destroyed, the monarchy had collapsed, and many of the people had been taken into exile. Against this background, Ezekiel has some very strong words for Israel's leaders. Earlier in chapter 34, he accuses the shepherds of feeding themselves rather than caring for their flock. They have taken the milk, the wool and the best animals, but neglected the sheep. They have failed to strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured or search for those who have wandered away. The shepherds were supposed to protect the people. Instead, they had exploited them.

It is against this background that we hear God's extraordinary promise: "I myself will search for my sheep and will sort them out." God does not promise to find a better political leader or establish a stronger administration. God says, "I myself will be their shepherd." God will search for the lost, bring back the strays, bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. God's authority is expressed not through domination, but through care. God's power is revealed in the willingness to seek out those who have been forgotten and restore those who have been wounded.

But God also promises to judge between the sheep, particularly between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. The fat sheep have been pushing and butting the weaker animals, taking more than their share and preventing others from finding pasture. God isn't simply concerned with gathering the flock. God is concerned with justice within the flock. The powerful cannot simply do as they please, and those who have accumulated more than they need cannot continue to trample upon those who have very little. God's shepherding involves both compassion and accountability.

Ezekiel then speaks of a new shepherd, a descendant of David, who will care for the people. For Christians, this promise finds its fulfilment in Jesus. But Jesus does not come to restore David's kingdom in the conventional political sense. He comes to reveal a completely different understanding of what God's kingdom looks like. We see this particularly clearly in Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew gives us a dramatic picture of the Son of Man coming in glory, seated upon his throne, with all the nations gathered before him. There are angels, a throne, a judgement and a separation between the sheep and the goats. It is an image of enormous power and authority. But what is most remarkable is not the grandeur of the scene. It is the criterion by which the people are judged. The King says: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

If we were constructing a picture of a glorious king, we might expect people to be judged on whether they had paid him homage or demonstrated their loyalty.

But Jesus tells a very different story. The King identifies himself with those who are hungry, thirsty, displaced, poorly clothed, sick and imprisoned. And the astonishing thing is that neither group recognises him. The righteous ask, "Lord, when was it that we saw you?" They are genuinely surprised. They had not realised that in caring for another human being, they were caring for Christ. Those who failed to respond are equally surprised. This is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of the passage. Jesus doesn't say that he is present only in the church, in the sanctuary or among those who share our beliefs. He says that he is present among the vulnerable. Christ is standing right in front of us in the person who needs our help.

I want to return briefly to the concern about imperialism, because it matters particularly when we use the language of Christ as King. Throughout history, kings and emperors have claimed divine authority for their rule. Christianity has sometimes participated in this, and the language of Christ's universal reign has been used to suggest that Christian nations, rulers or even the institutional Church have a God-given right to exercise authority over others. But this confuses the kingdom of God with the kingdoms of the world.

Jesus did not come to establish another empire. He did not gather an army, occupy territory or force people into submission. When Pilate questioned Jesus about his kingship, Jesus made clear that his kingdom was not of this world. Think about the irony of that scene. Jesus stands before the representative of the Roman Empire, the most powerful force of his time. Pilate has the authority to sentence him to death. Jesus appears powerless. Yet the Gospel invites us to recognise that the one standing before Pilate is the true King. His crown will be made of thorns,

and his victory will come not through the destruction of his enemies, but through the self-giving love that refuses to abandon humanity.

That's the paradox at the heart of Christian faith. The world sees power in the ability to make others submit. Christ reveals power in the willingness to give himself for others. The world sees greatness in being served. Christ finds greatness in serving. So when we speak of Christ's reign, we are not celebrating the restoration of some Christian empire. We are proclaiming that God's kingdom challenges every human system that exploits, excludes, diminishes or dehumanises people. That includes the Church itself. The reign of Christ is not an endorsement of religious power. It is a judgement upon power whenever it fails to serve love and justice.

Our reading from Ephesians gives us another perspective on this kingdom. The writer speaks of the extraordinary power of God, the same power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him at God's right hand, "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion." Nothing is outside the reach of God's power. No earthly ruler, political system or human institution has the final word. But notice what kind of power Paul is describing. It is resurrection power: the power that brings life out of death, hope out of despair, and new possibilities out of situations that appear beyond redemption. The resurrection is God's answer to the world's exercise of power. The authorities put Jesus to death because his way of living and teaching challenged their understanding of authority. They believed they could silence him. But God raised him from the dead. When we proclaim Christ as King, we are proclaiming that violence, injustice, greed and death do not have the

final word. Christ's reign is about transforming the world through the life-giving power of God's love.

Paul also describes the Church as Christ's body. If Christ is the head and we are his body, then we are not simply spectators watching the kingdom unfold. We are the hands and feet through which Christ's compassion becomes visible in the world. Those who inherit the kingdom are not necessarily people who have achieved great things or performed spectacular acts of religious devotion. They are those who have responded to human need. Sometimes the response is quite ordinary: sharing a meal, offering a welcome, visiting someone who is lonely, listening to someone who needs to be heard, or standing alongside someone who is being treated unfairly.

There is something particularly encouraging in this Gospel. The righteous do not seem to have been keeping score. They were not performing acts of kindness because they expected a reward or wanted to demonstrate their spiritual credentials. They simply responded to the needs of the people around them. Perhaps this is what it means to allow Christ to reign in our lives. Not to live in fear of judgement, but to become people whose hearts are increasingly shaped by the love of Christ. It is a lifelong transformation, and one in which the Holy Spirit continues to work within us.

For St Mary's, our response does not have to begin with grand plans or ambitious programmes. It begins with the people and circumstances already around us: the welcome we offer to someone who comes through our doors, the care we extend to someone who is struggling, and our willingness to stand alongside people who experience injustice. It also means recognising that the kingdom of God is

larger than our church, already at work beyond these walls. Our calling is not to bring Christ to places where he is absent. It is to recognise Christ already present and join in the work of love, healing and restoration that God is doing. We are not being asked to make Christ powerful. Christ already reigns. We are being invited to let the reality of his kingdom shape the way we live.

The Church year ends today, but it does not end with a story of political victory or earthly glory. It ends with a vision of Christ identifying himself with the hungry, the stranger, the sick and the imprisoned. It ends with a vision of a kingdom in which the forgotten are remembered, the wounded are healed, the weak are strengthened and everyone has a place at the table. And next Sunday, we begin again. We begin Advent, waiting for the coming of a king who will not arrive surrounded by armies or seated upon an earthly throne. He will come as a vulnerable child, born into an ordinary family, in an occupied land, with nowhere to lay his head. The story of Christ's kingship begins in humility and finds its fullness in self-giving love.

For Christ reigns not by dominating the world, but by loving it into new life. And our calling is to make that love visible.

Amen.