

Christ the King C

Above him was the inscription: *this is the King of the Jews*. In today's Gospel passage, we're invited to recognise Christ Crucified as King – not just as King of the Jews, but King of the Gentiles too, as King of all nations and in fact of the whole universe.

This, to put it mildly, is a challenge to the human imagination. The Crucified Christ is an image of utter desolation, of humanity at its weakest and least-dignified. Everything we associate with kings – power, honour, wealth, splendour – are completely absent here. To call this man a king – a man so deformed by suffering he's barely recognisable as such – seems like a sick joke. That's maybe how Pontius Pilate meant his inscription to be read. *This is the King of the Jews*. Attached to the cross, the irony of it is stark and brutal.

Let's think about another King for a moment, a King who shares some of the features of Christ Crucified. I'm talking about Shakespeare's *King Lear*. I saw *King Lear* in Stratford a few years ago with Sir Derek Jacobi in the leading role, the first time I'd seen it live, and it was a really powerful experience. By the end of the play – as you'll know if you've seen it – Lear has lost absolutely everything. His kingdom, his home, his wealth, his children, his mind... even his clothes. There's literally nothing left for him to lose except his life, which he eventually loses as well.

As a picture of sheer desolation, it's unrivalled anywhere in English literature. As a comment on the idea of kingship, it's equally powerful. Of course, Shakespeare was more subtle than Pontius Pilate. He didn't write in his stage directions that, with Lear howling at the heavens in madness and grief, someone should hold up an inscription saying "*This is the King of Britain*". He didn't need to. The irony was perfectly clear.

In the case of Christ crucified, however, there's another layer of irony at work. There's the bitter irony of Pilate's inscription – **this* is the King of the Jews* – and then there's a reverse irony, a divine irony that we can only appreciate after the resurrection. *This really is the King of the Jews*. (And of the Gentiles. And of the whole Universe.) This is only possible because God was the real author of this drama. God, not Shakespeare, was the master playwright here. And he wasn't writing a tragedy. He was writing, to borrow Dante's phrase, a 'Divine Comedy'.

If we set the two desolate Kings, Lear and Christ, next to each other, we see that they resemble each other in desolation, but differ from each other in how they come to their lowest point. Lear, starting from an exalted position as King of Britain, is gradually stripped of everything he owns through a mixture of cruelty, circumstance and his own folly. Christ, starting from an even higher position as the Son of God, strips *himself* of everything he owns, handing himself over to death to save his friends. It's the difference, if you like, between Jesus and the Good Thief. The Good Thief, by his own admission, has arrived at this point as a result of the choices he himself has made, with circumstances no doubt playing a role as well. Whereas Jesus, he observes, "has done nothing wrong". Suffering on the cross is not *his* just deserts, it's him choosing to share in *our* just deserts.

This lets us make a further observation: Christ Crucified differs from Lear, not just in the journey towards his lowest point, but also in the *meaning* of that point and the future it opens onto. If Lear in his desolation represents our humanity in all its wretchedness, naked and stripped of all pretension, Christ in his desolation represents the promise of redemption even for creatures as wretched as we. It's not the desolation of the cross that matters; it's the *meaning* of its desolation, both for Christ and for us. Once we perceive that meaning, we also perceive the dignity, the splendour and the royalty of Christ Crucified.

So yes, Pontius Pilate. You were right. Whether you played it straight or you meant it as a joke, it makes no difference. Many a true word has been spoken in jest, after all, and none truer than yours. This is indeed the King of the Jews.