Today is the feast of Christ the King. It reminds us that we belong to Jesus, citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, his subjects, his people, his inheritance- that even while we have an earthly home we are destined for glory through his love.

Kingdoms take their character and their values from the life of the King- so what sort of Kingdom do we belong to? Or what kind of King do we owe our loyalty to?

The first thing to say is that King is a title we give Jesus after his resurrection. He does not seize the crown himself- we give our crown, our loyalty, our obedience to the one who wore the crown of thorns and hung on the cross for love of us.

As this morning’s reading from Matthew shows if he is a King he is still a shepherd-king, the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. He is still the good shepherd, and he is the waiting father in the story of the prodigal son, and he is the gate by which we might enter into safety, and he is the vine from which we take our life and he is the way, and he is the truth, and he is the life.

He is not a distant, elevated, hidden King- he is a king who chooses to step down from his heavenly throne and leave behind his power and majesty and creep into a darkened stable in an occupied land in the nighttime and lie wrapped in his young mother’s exhausted arms, dependent and vulnerable and tiny. A king perhaps, but a shepherd king who chooses his people over his palace, who steps into our daily routine, our mundane world, our fragile existence, and blesses it.

If this reading from Matthew makes us uncomfortable- and it really should, if we’re paying attention- then imagine how much worse it must be to hear this as a King, as a President, as a Prime Minister or a leader of people. Shakespeare has his Henry 5th walking around the campsite on the eve of Agincourt, disguised in a cloak, listening to the complaints and hopes of his soldiers. A little bit of Harry in the night. And you will, I am sure, remember from the Coronation of King Charles that he stripped to his undershirt and then received the weight and the burden of monarchy with layer after layer of cloth and golden symbols. The example of Jesus teaches that Henry was never more regal than at the campfire, that Charles is never more regal than in the moment of his vulnerable humanity, waiting to receive the weight of our hopes and the legacy of a complex history.

What sort of king is Jesus? A shepherd king who leaves his power behind to come and live with his people, with his flock, with us, to know them and to be known by them in a way no other God and no other king would dare. To sit with us and share our air, our water, our fears, our hopes and to show love. To live love. To be love.

And if that feels uncomfortable for monarchs it should also feel pretty uncomfortable for us too. Because every time we do something to help those in need we are helping Jesus and acting like sheep- and every time we don’t then we don’t. We need to find a way of living which is true to our King but which does not leave us broken and exhausted because of the scale and size of the need- which is endless while our resources and energy are not. How do we know when to say enough? How do we know when we need to stop? How do we know when our need to help is impacting on those we are close to and starting to do damage to our relationships and to ourself?

We will each need to find our own way, and our own point of balance, and that point will clearly change over time. I think that the answer lies not in the amount of stuff we do to feed and clothe and heal those who are in need- it lies in how we do it. I don’t think we are meant to run through life tossing clothes at people as we sprint past or making out cheques whenever we feel guilty and hurrying on to the next crisis or the next chance to serve. There is all of the difference in the world between someone turning up at the Foodbank and collecting a bag of food from the doorstep while people peer at them through the window and someone turning up at the Foodbank and having a cup of tea with a volunteer, and telling their story, and knowing that they have been seen and heard and known.

We need connection. We need to know heart touching heart. We need to know that we are seen, known, loved, treasured. We need to know that we are real, and visible, and whole, and seen. Which is why, in part, Booth’s supermarkets are taking out a lot of their self-service tills because people long for connection.

We can’t follow a shepherd king who comes to live among us, in the straw and the nighttime, and try to do our helping and our good deeds from 5,000 feet. We can’t satisfy our call to serve by writing a cheque and then just move on. We have to connect. We have to touch people. We have to sit with them. We have to understand not just their need but who they are. I am always moved when I see photos of people in Care Homes when they were young. I love those adverts where you see the back of an elderly head looking in a mirror and looking back is a young soldier, or nurse, or bus driver. We need to see. We need to be seen.

You know what sort of Kingdom this is? Let me tell you. It is a kingdom in which nothing makes sense. It is a kingdom where the king steps down from his throne and never needs to put his robes back on. It is a kingdom where the king’s subjects squash a throny crown on his brow and murder him and he accepts it and rises again from the grave. It is a kingdom where the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep to find the one who is lost. It is a kingdom where it is better to hold the hand of someone who is hungry and talk to them and listen to them and look them in the eye and then get them a sandwich than it is to write a big cheque from great height which feeds 100 hungry people but which does not change your own heart or make any difference to your day.

Because, if you are not connected, if you are not looking, if you are not letting other people’s stories touch you, how will you see that the things you do for the hungry and the naked and the grieving you are doing for Jesus? And if you never see, how will you ever know that the eye of the person looking back at you is the approving gaze of the King, the Shepherd King, who comes down from his throne to kneel with us in the dust and the darkness and then lifts us back to our feet rejoicing? In this kingdom giving dignity and offering acceptance and sharing time and seeing- truly seeing- are what is precious. Writing cheques is not enough. Allowing ourselves to see, to connect, to be real and present, is everything.