

# St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The Cross and Politics – Monday of Holy Week

Monday 3 April 2023

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by Fr Max Kramer

---

What does it mean to preach Christ Crucified? Well, if St Paul is right that the preaching of the Crucifixion is the fundamental message of Christianity, then it must mean that the Cross has something to say to all aspects of human life. Preaching Christ Crucified cannot be limited to some important but limited part of our experience – spirituality, or personal salvation, or something like that – but must have something to say, at its very least, about everything that can be encompassed by human reason (what St Paul calls ‘Wisdom’) and all that can be encompassed by divine revelation (what St Paul calls Signs).

And so, I’d like to start this Holy Week journey with you on these Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday nights, not by thinking about the Cross in the context of personal faith or individual emotional response, but rather by thinking about how the contemplation of the Cross can shape some of the largest and most significant aspects of our human reality.

And so I want to begin our reflections by thinking beyond small talk, by discussing three things that we are not supposed to address in polite society:

The Cross and Politics, The Cross and Religion, and, finally, The Cross and Truth (Truth being, for a priest, the closest you can get to talking shop), in the hope that together we might discover how the Cross shapes not only our own relationship with God, but how we make sense of our world at the broadest level.

So let’s begin with The Cross and Politics. It’s unfortunate, perhaps, that the Politics of Jesus is one of the most commonly discussed aspects of Christianity in national life. Unfortunate because in the media, the discussion is cut down to rather simplistic and partisan soundbites.

So sometimes we hear that “you should keep religion out of politics” – something that is never going to fly with any actual person of faith – and at other times we are reassured that with miraculous predictability the Gospel endorses whatever the Labour Party should choose to put in its latest manifesto.

And in as much as the Gospel itself ever gets a look in, it’s a few well-known, handpicked bits of Jesus’ teaching or actions, – love thy neighbour – many of which are not too distinctive from what you might find in any other philosophy or religious system.

But the question I want to ask today is what contribution does the distinctive nature of Christianity have to make to our political thinking – what difference should the fact that our religion is shaped not around some good advice, or kind words, but around the story of the Crucified One, make to our attitude to how we order our society.

# St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The Cross and Politics – Monday of Holy Week

Monday 3 April 2023

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by Fr Max Kramer

---

Well, the first thing to say is that I think the Gospel writers want us to draw some political conclusions from the Passion narratives. And this can be seen by two titles that they attribute to Jesus.

The first title, The King of the Jews, is – in Matthew's Gospel – woven into the story of Jesus from beginning to end.

Matthew's Gospel begins with what we often call the Story of the Three Kings. And people who know a little bit about the Gospel gleefully point out to you that they are not kings and nowhere does it say that there are three of them.

But that clever point misses the fact that Kingship is absolutely at the heart of this story, which is perhaps better named, the story of the two Kings.

In 40 or 39 BC, on the Initiative of Mark Anthony, the Roman Senate voted to appoint Herod King of the Jews. Exactly the same title that, in a moment of staggering political naivety, the wise men use in Herod's presence for Jesus, asking the official King of the Jews, Herod, where the real King of the Jews has been born. And so, unsurprisingly, the politically astute and fairly cynical Herod, decides that Judea isn't big enough for two kings of the Jews. He at least sees the shared title as a deliberate political challenge.

And if the words on the Cross (The King of the Jews) indicates that Jesus does have the ultimate claim to Herod's title, then the political stakes rise even higher at the moment that Jesus dies, when the Centurion pronounces:

"Truly this man was God's Son!"

For God's Son, *theou uios*, was a principal title of the Roman Emperor himself. Tiberius Caesar, son of god, son of the god Augustus.

Especially in the mouth of a Roman Centurion, as close to an archetype of the everyday face of the Roman Imperial Establishment in the provinces as you can get, the political allusions of the title are hard to ignore.

The attribution of the two key political titles to Jesus, then, King of the Jews, and Son of God, suggest that seeing political meaning in the Passion is not just a modern fad, but a key part of the Gospel writers original intention.

But if a political concern is there in the Gospels, what is it? Well, it seems to me that the Gospels, and in particular the Passion narratives, draw out three significant political threads. Although, to

# St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The Cross and Politics – Monday of Holy Week

Monday 3 April 2023

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by Fr Max Kramer

---

control expectations in advance, I'm afraid that none of them are going to tell you who to vote for in an election.

The first key political thread is this. The Passion narrative *unmasks* the rhetoric of political power in a way which is as relevant to many modern societies as it is to the Roman Empire.

In Livy's History of Rome, Book 33, there is an exultant description of the Roman Imperial Mission, following the Roman defeat of the Macedonian rulers of the Greek mainland. Expressions of gratitude, Livy claims, pour in that:

*there was one people in the world (he means the Romans of course) which would fight for others' liberties at its own cost, to its own peril and with its own toil, not limiting its guaranties of freedom to its neighbours, to men of the immediate vicinity, or to countries that lay close at hand, but ready to cross the sea that there might be no unjust empire anywhere and that everywhere justice, right, and law might prevail.* [33.33]

The three great Latin monosyllables with which Livy ends, *ius, fas, lex* (Justice, right, law), were supplemented by a further one by the great emperor Augustus *pax* (peace), and these four punchy words represent what Roman Empire's PR messaging, what it claimed to be bringing to the world.

But if this is the public face of Roman Imperialism, the Passion of Jesus invites us to look beneath the rhetoric and see the reality. The link-back to the massacre of the innocents reminds us of the lack of sense of *right (fas)* in the empire's client king; the pragmatic release of the murderer rather than Jesus reveals the governor's inability to uphold any kind of natural *justice (ius)*, the false testimony against Jesus exposes the imperial power's lack of ability – or simple lack of interest – in upholding the *law (lex)*, and the murderous violence of the cross demonstrates that the much-lauded virtue of *peace (pax)* is only achieved by the infliction of the most brutal violence and bloodshed on those who are simply inconvenient. The Passion narrative systematically reveals that the proud Imperial claims of *ius, fas, lex, pax* (justice, righteousness, law, and peace), are often only a polite smokescreen for a brutal kind of pragmatism, violence, and raw power.

This first political thread in the Passion narrative, then, is there to encourage us to be wary of the rosy and self-justifying rhetoric of those in power, to be alert to the realities of how political power is established and maintained, and especially to attend to what price the weak often have to pay to maintain the security of the majority.

But, as a balance to this important (if perhaps challenging) insight, we find a second political thread in the Passion narrative. That in a world held in the power of God, human power, even at its most violent, can never ultimately have the last word.

# St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The Cross and Politics – Monday of Holy Week

Monday 3 April 2023

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by Fr Max Kramer

---

The narrative of Jesus alludes to the chain of violence, familiar from all totalitarian societies, that threatens individuals into compliance. If you don't behave perhaps they will criticise you, and if that doesn't stop you perhaps they will ostracise you, and then, failing that, beat you, and then imprison you, and then torture you, and then at last kill you. Each ascending threat, worse than the previous one, is supposed to bring you into line.

Yet Jesus' death and resurrection demonstrates that even the worst that political power can throw at him does not determine or extinguish his life. That awful as the suffering inflicted by the Romans upon him is, it does not destroy him entirely. And it is that faith that has empowered witnesses to his truth throughout the centuries to face the worst that political power can do – in the knowledge that political power is never the final, ultimate authority. In the hope of the resurrection, the story of the Passion becomes also one of empowerment, as it opens up for us the possibility to live out our public life, our politics, out of faith, rather than out of fear.

And the third political thread? Well this is, I think, Jesus' own political vision. It's something I think about a lot, and I suspect I will spend my life trying to interpret it. I think it's probably quite revolutionary – although not in the way that that term is usually used. Because – ironically, given how quick people usually are to tell us that Jesus thinks modern society should be exactly like this or that – the political revolution of Jesus actually resists this kind of orientation towards outcomes.

For me, the politics of Jesus is about recovering the significance of means from their usual subordination to ends. Jesus is surrounded by political actors, Herod, Pilate, Caiaphas, to some extent the emperor, who, if we could interrogate them, would probably be the kind of people who would say well the ends justify the means. One man's death is unpleasant, a bit of a show of force pour encourager les autres, but it's just the price you need to pay for maintaining order. A shrug of the shoulders. You don't get the world peace that the Roman Empire liked to trumpet, without shedding some blood.

But when we contrast Jesus with these characters, those who compete with him for the title of King or Priest or Son of God, as I believe the Gospels encourage us to do, we seem to meet someone who repeatedly refuses this priority of ends over means.

Someone who advocates attending to the one lost sheep, rather than writing it off in favour of the wellbeing of the majority, who spends effort on the time-consuming and needy individuals who come across his path, who is so unconcerned about his own public reputation that he busies himself with doing good even when it looks bad – eating with tax collectors and prostitutes, someone who again and again refuses to instrumentalise any of the individuals he comes across in any way whatever in service of some grand ideal, some good reputation, or some utilitarian outcome.

# St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The Cross and Politics – Monday of Holy Week

Monday 3 April 2023

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

Sermon by Fr Max Kramer

---

And this refusal to see people as just tools or objects in some greater cause – I want to say in closing – includes Jesus' refusal to instrumentalise his own death, his refusal to instrumentalise his own victimhood. Even though the Books of Maccabees show that Jesus and his contemporaries of the first century knew all about the heroic possibilities of victimhood, of the eternal memory it caused, and the power and conviction it gave to your cause, Jesus refuses this opportunity to use the cross as an opportunity for grandstanding.

In the Gospels, there is no lengthy last speech of defiance before Pilate in some dramatic confrontation, no theological browbeating of the high priest, no wrathful words of judgment from the cross, no righteous anger that I can see. Rather, the one who attended to others for themselves rather than as tools in his scheme, in his last journey attends not to using his suffering to prove his point, or win an argument, or to get one up on his opponents, but in his suffering he attends simply to his own humanity, and the humanity of those around him, who know not what they do.

And so Jesus' Politics, the Politics of the Passion, I think, is more a politics of means than a politics of ends.

It calls us back from our worship of big ideas, and powerful institutions, and grand plans, and dare I say of strategies, by reminding us to look at the human costs they so often bring, and by revealing to us that grandiose as they may seem they do not have ultimate power. And the Passion narrative reminds us to concentrate instead on the integrity of the means by which we operate: for approaching others as human beings rather than as cogs in some carefully-formed design, is a truly revolutionary political insight – I believe – and one that Jesus encourages us to extend even to our own identities, our own sufferings, and our own selves.