And the people said, “No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.”

So that we might be like other nations. I often find myself wondering whether we are really all that different in the church. What makes us, as Christians, distinctive in the world? Sometimes it seems as though we have two choices – to be distinctive in a truly unhelpful way, the way of the so called ‘traditionalists’, or to be hardly distinguishable from other liberal minded groups who aspire to exist for the good of all, of which there are many. ‘What makes you different?’, a local parish priest was asked. ‘Well,’ she answered, ‘everyone is welcome here….’ But that’s true of almost any voluntary organization. On the other hand, I’m horrified when I hear that when a poll asks whether the Church of England is considered to make a positive contribution to society – although the over 55’s agree, the 30-55’s are more or less neutral, the under 30’s strongly disagree. Why is that? You might want to ask yourself – a lot is to do with our perceived homophobia, the child abuse scandals, the debacle over women bishops didn’t do us a lot of good. It seems that when we are seen, rightly or more often wrongly, to stand against the tide of public opinion, we often do so in a way that brings us, appropriately, into disrepute.

We are not supposed to be like others. But we are supposed to be different in a way that reflects the Kingdom to which we, as Christians belong. There should be something about us which causes others to look at us askance and say, “You’re not from round here, are you?” Some whiff of a foreign and slightly exotic land, some sense of a wider perspective which looks at the immediate with just the slightest air of detachment – and at least, the knowledge that things could, and perhaps should, be different. I remember years ago listening to Anita Roddick describing the essential characteristics of an entrepreneur, someone who pursues a vision and sees it happen, sometimes against all the odds: it’s like being an ex-pat, or an immigrant, she said. You never ever simply accept things for how they are.

As Christians, we’re ‘not from round here’. We belong somewhere else. When Pilate said to Jesus, ‘Are you the king of the Jews’, he said, ‘I am a king – but my kingdom’s not from round here’. That’s true – Jesus will never be King in this world of ours – he doesn’t quite fit in, just as we shouldn’t quite fit in. But when we are with him, here in worship, or wherever we come across him in the world, we catch a sense of where he’s from – a whiff, an aroma, a window into a different world, a different way of doing things … and we should seek to live as though we, too, belong there.

So if it’s different, different to be a Christian, but not in the way much of the world might imagine so – what is distinctive? Well I see that in the work of the Spirit – the Spirit who binds us into one in one family. Belonging with people we might not choose to belong with. Discovering hope and possibility in places we might have considered cul-de-sacs. Finding love where love had been long lost. Doors opening where they had been shut. Resurrection where before only burial. Life where before only death.

RS Thomas puts it like this, in his poem ‘The Kingdom’:

It’s a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It’s a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

This is what it means to have Christ as King, and not to be like other nations. But we all have to be a part of it. This morning I described two particular opportunities to make this Kingdom a reality in the life of those in this city who may feel themselves excluded from the festive season … I commend them to you. One is to assist with a project to provide shelter for rough sleepers. The other is to assist with setting up a Work Club and Food Bank distribution point in the centre of Coventry, overlooking Broadgate.

Are you part of this different Kingdom – let’s show that in the way we live our lives. Inviting others, making it possible for them to discover a new Kingdom, a Kingdom where all have a place, a part to play. A place to love and be loved, a place to discover what reconciliation, being made one, means in reality for them.