

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**Sermon – Sunday next before Advent**

**Christ the King**

**21<sup>st</sup> November 2021**

*The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain*

Last Sunday, after the service in Marseille a group of us went to the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery here to take part in an Act of Remembrance. It was a ceremony of contrasts: officially a secular event, but held within a framework of prayer; a place filled with signs and memorials in English, to which retired French servicemen had asked if they could come to honour the 1754 people from across the world buried or commemorated there who had given their lives on French soil in two World Wars.

After the two minutes' silence, the British and French national anthems were played. The English-speakers listened to the music of 'God save the Queen'. The French-speakers then sang La Marseillaise with brio. The song, written in Alsace in 1792 by Rouget de Lisle after France had declared war against Austria, was written as a rallying cry to defend a country. Popular with soldiers from Marseille as they marched up the Rhône valley (hence the name by which the song became known), it ends with an exhortation to 'let an impure blood flow in our furrows'.

At the turn of the millennium, the French government proposed some new words to La Marseillaise, more pacific in tone, ending with the words '*liberté,*

*égalité, fraternité*, but somehow it never caught on, so the song still speaks of blood. It was another paradox of the day, as we stood among memorials to those whose blood *had* flowed in French furrows, in its defence.

The celebration of Christ the King, on this last Sunday of the church's liturgical year before Advent starts next Sunday, is also a day of paradox. Some people feel a sense of unease about it nowadays. How do you celebrate it living in a republic? The word 'king' in France carries no image now. Even in the United Kingdom, few people living can remember a time when the monarch was a king. Yet it's always salutary to be reminded why this Sunday was designated in honour of Christ as King. The idea was introduced in 1925 by Pope Pius XI, to emphasise the non-violent rule of Christ in the face of the growing brutality of Mussolini's fascism in Italy. That's why this day still matters. There is something important and necessary about holding earthly power to account against the Kingdom of God.

It's one of the reasons it makes sense to me that there should be a figure in a surplice at an Act of Remembrance. We are used to it in the Church of England, as it is an established church, visible at moments of national significance. But it's anathema here in France, where for the last hundred years church and state have been kept separate.

Another paradox about last Sunday was that the silence wasn't completely silent. Part of the genius of the designs of the War Cemeteries is their use of water. The gullies full of clear water that speak of the river of life in the Book of Revelation: 'the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On

either side of the river is the tree of life... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.' (Revelation 22.1-2.) The two minutes' silence was broken by an irresistible sound of water rising from two fountains on either side of the stone of remembrance. Water 'gushing up to eternal life', in Christ's words to the woman he met at the well (John 4.14). The fountains tell of the irresistible force of resurrection life, triumphing over the tragedy of crucifixion. That's another reason why it makes sense for there to be a figure in surplice at an Act of Remembrance, mapping our tragedies onto something larger. The story of a power that is beyond us, a love that is inexhaustible.

That was, and is, the real point of the day in the calendar on which the Church celebrates Christ the King. Mapping our lives, and the lives of those in authority, whether they believe it or not, onto something larger. We all stand under God, to whom we must render an account. Where does our true allegiance lie?

If Christ is King, what of his kingdom? That, too, is paradoxical. For it's one where the marginalised are brought to the centre, and those apparently at the centre are marginalised. The Beatitudes as a political manifesto would be laughable. But Mary's song, the Magnificat, insists we are dealing with a God who is capable of: 'casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly'. We are dealing with a king who arrives at the seat of earthly power not on a powerful horse but on a humble donkey. One who wears a crown not of gold but of thorns, the place from which he reigns not a throne but the cross, an instrument of torture. This kingdom is subversive, counter-cultural, on the side of the oppressed, the weak.

Yet Jesus is perceived as a threat by those who hold earthly power. And in our Gospel reading today Jesus arrives before Pilate, the Roman governor,

ostensibly the most powerful human being in the Gospels. All Pilate wants to know is whether he is a king – is he, or is he not, a threat to the power of Rome? Pilate is soon satisfied that he poses no threat to the Empire, but he is puzzled by Jesus's replies to his questions. This brief scene shows how difficult human authority finds it to understand the authority of Christ. The story decentres our human notions of power by pointing out that this is not the only world, the only reality, and that the other reality is ultimately more powerful.

The Kingdom of God, about which Jesus taught throughout his ministry, is not 'from this world'. Its values are inverted, based as they are on the power of love in contrast to the power of violence. Jesus notes that his mission is to testify to the truth. Pilate's lack of interest in this is reflected in his impatient question, appearing in the verse that follows just after our reading, 'What is truth?'. It's a question to which apparently Pilate does not wait for the answer, although the answer is standing in front of him. Speaking truth to power is what Jesus consistently did, even though it cost him his life. Political events always raise the question for churches whether they are prepared to do the same.

Where does our true allegiance lie? It is to Christ, and therefore to God, 'the Alpha and the Omega, ... who is and who was and who is to come' (Revelation 1.8). May all of us be reminded of the hope and the inspiration we find in the person of Jesus Christ, whom today we acknowledge as our King – subversive and counter-cultural though that may be.

On Friday evening, a member of our congregation who is a migrant was confirmed by the Bishop. In doing so, he stepped into an extraordinary tradition, with its story of the upside-down Kingdom where people feed the hungry,

welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, because they are infinitely valued. And follow a king with thorns on his head. As our reading from the Book of Daniel put it: 'His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.' Thanks be to God.

Amen.