



All Saints Marseille

Sermon

Sunday, 24th November 2019

Christ the King

Jeremiah 23.1-6; Colossians 1.11-20; Luke 23.33-43

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Today, the last Sunday before Advent, is the final Sunday of our liturgical year. And we conclude the Christian year with a celebration that focuses on Christ as glorified Lord and King. The celebration was introduced in 1925 by Pope Pius XI in order to emphasise the non-violent kingship and rule of Christ in the face of the growing brutality of the fascism of Mussolini. There's a warning to us there, in this new era where far right populism is becoming fashionable again, where slogans of hate trip too easily off politicians' tongues. The original festival was primarily intended to counter the claims of secularism by holding up the model of Christ, as King of the Creation, whose just and gentle rule is supreme. What might this notion have to teach us in these times, and what does it have to do with the crucifixion?

Jeremiah, in our Old Testament reading, describes a people whose leadership has left them fragmented and pulling in different directions (all too like our own times). They have lost any sense of who they are, or that they belong together in community as God's people. Jeremiah is forthright in condemning their leaders, who should have acted like shepherds to them but instead have allowed them to become scattered. But he points forward to a time when God will raise up faithful shepherds to lead them, who will restore their sense of mutual interdependence.



At that point they will be ready for the coming of the Messiah, as they will recognise his reign of justice for what it is – an echo of God’s own nature.

Unlike Jeremiah’s people, the Colossians, to whom Paul is writing, have already got there. They have recognised the rule of God, and have made the link between their own shepherd – Jesus - and God. They see how he has led them out of confusion and darkness into the light of a kingdom of justice and peace, and that the reason he can do this is because he is the full reflection of God’s own loving sovereignty. He is ‘the image of the invisible God’.

The thief hanging on the cross beside Jesus also has an instinctive sense of God’s justice. He acknowledges his own guilt and Jesus’s innocence, so that in the hour of his death Jesus promises that he will be with him in Paradise.

That’s how our readings today fit together. But why the cross, in the middle of it all? The answer is that it is central to who God is. As one commentator has put it: ‘The theological significance of Good Friday is immersed in the marrow of Christian faith and pumps through the bloodstream of the church’s life. Good Friday forces the faithful to take a hard look at the violence and meanness of the world, the bloodiness of the cross, the depravity of the human condition, and God nailed to an olive shaft by human hands. Good Friday pulls the curtain back on the suffering God...’¹

The ‘suffering God’. One of the things scholars have spent a great deal of time thinking about through the centuries is known as ‘the work of Christ’ – what it is that Jesus achieved through his death. It is sometimes referred to as the ‘atonement’ – literally, ‘at-one-ment’, the bringing back of humanity to be at one with God. Different traditions of the church have tended to emphasise different

¹ Craig T. Kocher in *Feasting on Luke*, p 326.



ways of understanding the ‘work of Christ’. Those who worship in the evangelical tradition often emphasise Christ as having died in substitution for sinful humanity - the one who was without sin voluntarily taking our sins upon himself and dying for them, thereby opening for us the gate of heaven. In another part of the church’s tradition, up until the 1930s there was often an emphasis on Christ as victor in the age-old struggle between good and evil.

But in the aftermath of the Second World War, as the full horror of the holocaust became known, and with it the knowledge of the depths of depravity to which humans were capable of sinking, the somewhat simplistic model of Christ as victor no longer translated all that people felt about the reality of the human condition. The German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from the cell in which he had been imprisoned for his resistance to the Nazi regime, from where he was led to his execution only weeks before the war ended, wrote that ‘only a suffering God can help’.

The concept of a God who comes alongside us in our suffering, who has known human despair from the inside and can therefore be trusted never to abandon us, was found to be of more help to post-War writers such as Jurgen Moltmann. The English theologian W H Vanstone wrote a hymn, ‘Morning glory, sunlit sky’, [a setting of which we will hear during the distribution of Communion this morning], in which he reflects on the cost of love for a suffering God:

‘Open are the gifts of God,
gifts of love to mind and sense;
hidden is love’s agony,
love’s endeavour, love’s expense.



Love that gives, gives ever more,
gives with zeal, with eager hands,
spares not, keeps not, all outpours,
ventures all, its all expends.’

He continues:

‘Drained is love in making full,
bound in setting others free,
poor in making many rich,
weak in giving power to be.’

This is the paradox, the mystery we celebrate today. What looks to the world like failure – a man put to death as a common criminal - turns out to be the most powerful inspiration for self-sacrificial love that the world has ever known.

Luke’s Gospel grounds the story of God’s love in the forgotten people of the world, ending with a condemned and dying thief being promised a place in paradise. In a Good Friday world we need a God who is not distant from our suffering, but who enters into the pain and hurt and horror with us. And yet notice how Jesus responds. On the cross he refuses to give in to the meanness and arrogance that surround him. In the face of evil and despair, the passion of his loving remains. To the cries for blood from the crowd, he does not respond. To the clubs and whips that beat him, he refuses to fight back. To the soldiers who have torn his body, he offers forgiveness. To the thief, he whispers the hope of eternity. On the cross the passion of Jesus’s suffering is surpassed by the passion of his redeeming love. And that is why the church has accorded him the greatest honour that humans have to accord - that of sovereign.



And yet it is of course more than that of sovereign. From the earliest days of the church, in the processing which people did in their hearts and minds of the significance of this figure dying on the cross, there was a recognition that somehow it had revealed the true nature of the God who is the source of all things. As our epistle puts it: 'He is the image of the invisible God.' Or as Vanstone writes towards the end of his hymn:

‘Therefore he who shows us God
helpless hangs upon the tree;
and the nails and crown of thorns
tell of what God’s love must be.’

And when we arrive at that recognition it changes everything. It changes our notion of what sovereignty means. It changes our notion of what deity means. It changes our notion of what our own lives are for - the costly service we see in Jesus changes our view of what it means to make a difference in the world. It liberates us from our focus on ourselves, encouraging us instead to focus on God and on other people as the proper object of our concern, living out the two great commandments of Jesus - to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbour as ourselves. The recognition of Jesus as the very image of God enlarges our horizons, expands our hearts, explodes our thinking away from self into a world of endless possibility. What if people began to live out the Beatitudes? What if they put into practice the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount? What if people who have been hurt by others could learn to forgive them? What if... ?

It is those things which this day, the feast of Christ the King, encourages us to reflect on. On this last Sunday of the church’s year, Christ is presented to us as



the mocked King on the Cross as well of the King of the universe. The greatest humiliation and the greatest victory are both revealed. For there is irony in the inscription that was put above Jesus's head: 'This is the king of the Jews'. It was intended as mockery, put there by a weak ruler who had given in to mob mentality. There must have been passers-by who, seeing the inscription and jeering at the one dying beneath it, challenged him to reign from there. Yet the fact that for over two thousand years men and women have given up their lives to follow him, the fact that this church and countless others like it were built, and the mere fact that I am preaching this sermon this morning and you are listening to it, means that that is exactly what he does.

Vanstone concludes his hymn with these words:

Here is God: no monarch he,
throned in easy state to reign;
here is God, whose arms of love
aching, spent, the world sustain.'

Thanks be to God.