

Sermon, 22 November 2020

Today the theme is Christ the King.

I wonder if you have ever felt what it would be like to be a monarch? Have you ever felt, as I have, what it would be like to be the Queen? To have everything arranged for your convenience wherever you go. To go on journeys to exotic places, to be able to indulge your own pleasures, whether it's horse racing or riding in the park. To be surrounded by helpers of every kind who respond to your every whim. I am sure there are many disadvantages too like incessant publicity, little private space and danger, but they seem very minor in comparison to all the benefits.

What a very different monarchy Christ the king on a cross. We all try to climb up in life, clambering for better jobs, better positions, better houses and so on. Throughout his life Jesus spent no time climbing, but a lot of time descending. As the Bible says in many ways, "emptying himself and becoming as all humans are, "living in the limitations of weakness" - Hebrews 5 v.2.

Jesus walked, enjoyed and suffered the entire human journey until he ended up on a cross; that horrible exposure and pointless cruelty. As Hebrew's says, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weakness, but we have one who was like us in every way, experienced every temptation and never backtracked."

Remember the encounter between the doubting Thomas and the risen Christ. It is not just a story about the fact of the resurrection but a story about believing that someone could be resurrected and wounded at the same time. "Put your finger here" Jesus says to Thomas. And here we see Jesus the king on a cross. Great love and great suffering (both healing and woundedness) are the universal and always available paths of transformation, because they are the only things strong enough to break through our ego, our protections and our pretensions.

Jesus invites Thomas and all doubters into a tangible kind of religion that makes human pain and suffering the way into both compassion and understanding. The divine mind through the cross transforms all human suffering by identifying completely with the human predicament and standing in full solidarity with it from beginning to end. We recognise hierarchical and vertical accountability but almost no lateral accountability to one another as Jesus hoped for when he prayed that "we all might be one " and all might be caught up in the cosmic sweep of divine love.

The Gospel is a solemn warning. All people will be brought to account for the acts of kindness they have done or failed to do. Jesus himself the Son of Man will come in glory as he will be the focal point in the Last Judgement. It is not just that acts of kindness are exemplary but in doing them we are doing them to Jesus himself. For Jesus to become Christ he must surpass the bounds of space and time, ethnicity, nationality, class and gender. Christ is a mirror big enough to receive everything and every single part of us.

God's mighty strength was seen at work, says the epistle "When he raised Christ from the dead and enthroned him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all government and authority, all power and dominion and any title of sovereignty that commands allegiance not only in this age, but also in the age to come." That is his glory, his kingship.

As we take communion and receive the cup in the act of drinking his blood we are consciously uniting ourselves with all unjust suffering in the world from the beginning of time until its end. Wherever there is suffering there's the empathy and sympathy of God. This is all my blood Jesus is saying which sanctifies the victim and gives all bloodshed utter and final significance. How daring and shocking it was for Jesus to turn the whole tradition of impure blood on its head and make blood holy and even a point of contact with the divine.

So Christ for us is not just Jesus of Nazareth, but as the epistle implies, something much more immense and cosmic in significance. This vision has the power to radically alter what we believe, how we see others and relate to them. It expands our vision of how great God might be and our understanding of what God is doing in our world.

The revelation of the risen Christ as everywhere and eternal is clearly affirmed in the Bible and in the early church where the emphasis of the Christian faith was still creative and expanding. Through the act of creation God manifested the eternally outflowing Divine Presence into the physical and material world. God loves things by becoming them, loves things by uniting with them, not by excluding them. Ordinary matter is the hiding place of the Spirit and thus the very body of God.

Since the beginning of time God's Spirit has been revealing its glory and goodness in the physical creation. Without that sense of the inherent sacredness of the world - of every bit of life and death - we struggle to see God in our own reality, protect it or love it.

A corporate reading of the Gospel is difficult but it gives hope and justice to history. We need to find the communal meaning and significance of the suffering of all life and ecosystems on our planet. Otherwise, we will continue to retreat into our own individual small worlds in our quest for personal safety and security.

The Gospel is about learning to live with and in God. As Athanasius said in the 4th century "God in Christ became the bearer of flesh for a time so that humanity could become the bearer of Spirit for ever".

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