

24th November 2024, Christ the King

Daniel 7: 9-10, 13-14; Psalm 93; Revelation 1: 4b-8; John: 33-37

I was standing in the Lady Chapel, waiting to celebrate the BCP Eucharist on Friday of last week, and found myself looking once again at that glorious east window. I realised that, in picture form, the middle set of panels said everything I needed to say about this festival of Christ the King. Starting at the bottom, Jesus is carrying the cross, then we see him on that cross being crucified, then tenderly taken down from the cross and laid in the tomb. On the first Easter morning Mary meets him in the garden, the Ascension occurs, and right at the top, over all, is the figure of Christ the King, a seamless movement from suffering human to omnipotent deity, and inevitably shown as a journey from one to the other, when the whole point of Christ the King is that he is both at once, physical and transcendent. By going through those stages in a physically upward direction, I am rather reinforcing the image of God and Christ as up there, looking down on us all. Today's readings emphasise this concept even more with startlingly graphic descriptions of God from the Book of Daniel, the Psalms and the Book of Revelation.

The Book of Daniel throughout shows God as omnipotent. He sets up and removes earthly rules and empires; he rescues his people from the power of earthly kings; and he teaches those kings the limits of their sovereignty. Today's reading gives us, surely, the ultimate picture of the child's view of God, sitting in judgement over everybody. He is clothed in white, has woolly hair and is surrounded by fire, and he is joined by one "like a human being", the Son of Man perhaps, on whom is conferred dominion, glory and kingship.

Psalm 93 reminds us that "The Lord is King and has put on glorious apparel." Again we celebrate God's kingship, his power even over the primeval waters of creation. The Book of Revelation is also about sovereignty, expressing the honour due to the one God, and

addressing Jesus whose sacrifice brings about salvation. All the nations mourn as a sign of repentance leading to that salvation, and God speaks as absolute sovereign – Alpha and Omega, first and last, beginning and end. God’s uniqueness as Creator precedes everything in the past and will bring everything to fulfilment in the future. Taken altogether we have an overwhelming picture, quite enough to bring us to our knees as we acknowledge our unworthiness. The words the choir will sing during communion provide the perfect response to that ultimate picture of Christ in glory:

“Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand.”

Which is what this feast day is all about.

In 1922, Pope Pius XI wrote a post-World War 1 encyclical on the peace of Christ in the kingdom of Christ. He was worried that there was no true peace in the world despite hostilities having ended. Unbridled nationalism provoked him to write that true peace could only exist under Christ’s rule. The Sunday before Advent was established as a feast day in 1925 in response to ever-growing atheism and secularism, and its message is that Christians should acknowledge Christ’s kingship in their lives, obeying God’s laws, practising servant-leadership and loving God and neighbour. The world today, 100 years on, needs this encyclical more than ever in the face of escalating war, secularism, mistrust and hatred. Today, as Christ the King puts us on an eternal canvas, we must turn our backs on such negativity and embrace life-giving truth, although with fear and trembling.

Today’s Gospel puts all the preceding words into perspective. Jesus stands before Pilate who is trying to work out whether or not Jesus is a king. But they are not speaking the same language. Pilate only understands the language of earthly political power of which he is the apex in Jerusalem. Jesus is not a king in any sense that makes him a threat to the

political authorities. Jesus is a king who bears witness to the truth and his one function is to reveal the truth – that everything is from God, and that he is the one sent by God. In its infinite wisdom, the lectionary omits the next, and to my mind vital verse, when Pilate asks, “What is truth?” blind to the fact that Jesus, right there in front of him, is the truth. Truth is not some abstract, philosophical concept to be argued about. Truth stares Pilate and us in the face in the person of Jesus who watches as Pilate moves away from him, the truth, and returns to those who are not true in any shape or form, the Jews and Romans who go on to torture and crucify that truth. The followers of Jesus do not fight for his power. Through his total lack of power, his powerlessness, flows the transforming love that gives us the freedom to love one another, way beyond boundaries, borders, differences, mistrust and hatred. His is the love that transcends our petty concerns, the earthly barriers that, like Pilate, blind us to the truth.

Beside the transcendent truth of the Gospel story, other stories do indeed look like the stuff of picture books, to be discarded when we are more grown up. The Gospel depends on suffering, sacrifice and death, and the Gospel truth transforms those picture books into 3-dimensional luminescent reality. As we stand in Pilate’s shoes and struggle with the question “What is truth?” we have only to look to Jesus for the answer, and as Jesus takes his place beside the Alpha and the Omega, beside the Ancient of Days, we begin to glimpse the truth of the omnipotent Godhead, knocking us to our knees and putting all tinpot potentates, including Trump and Putin, in their place.

What do we, wailing with all the tribes of the earth in penitence, and all humanity including those who don’t know the meaning of humility or repentance, look like from the point of view of eternity? How does God see us all? How does God see the whole created

world and all that is in it, from an eternal viewpoint? Of course it's an impossible question, but I got a few glimmerings from reading the winner of this year's Booker prize, "Orbital" by Samantha Harvey. Not specifically religious in any sense, its subject matter is literally cosmic, and much of it is more poetry than prose. It describes a crew of 6 circling the earth in an International Space Station at a speed of 17,000 mph and at an altitude of 250 miles. It is emphatically not my kind of book! And yet I loved it for its hope and its beauty in the ordinary and the extraordinary. At that speed you orbit the earth 16 times in one 24 hour period, so, I quote, "The whipcrack of morning arrives every 90 minutes." They are outside time and space which puts small concerns in their place. Here is the big picture in all its glory. But each astronaut is a human being coping with their own tragedies – news of the death of a mother, thoughts of home – and they all gaze helplessly at the gathering typhoon threatening a tiny island. The cosmos in all its magnificence fills them with awe. At the same time, they deal with the day to day experiments they must conduct within the separate timescale of the space station, and they routinely tape cutlery to surfaces so that they are not hit by a flying spoon as they deal with the absence of gravity. This book challenges our conception of reality, literally turns things upside down, cosmic vastness and individual humans.

Jesus calls us in two directions simultaneously. On the cross his arms reach out to us horizontally in love, embracing each and every one of us, as we in turn must also do to each other. At the same time, the cross points vertically, beyond the here and now to a reality we can only speak of in the pictures of metaphor, to the throne of God and to the glory of Christ, which can only be attained through the dying man in the centre of that cross. Our day-to-day vision is so very limited. We can't possibly cope with all of the agonies of this world – survivors of failed safeguarding, refugees, war victims, the homeless in this country

this Christmas – but an eternal view puts things in perspective. From that spacecraft you couldn't see the individual tragedies; they only came to life through each individual human being in the spacecraft. But that spaceless and timeless perspective brought its own hope. Jesus was unique in encompassing the physical experience of a Galilean man at the same time as being at one with the transcendence of God: the humanity of the man who loves each and every person as they are and where they are, and the eternal vision of the one who at God's right hand sees how everything is and how everything can be.

I finish with wonderful words of a hymn by W H Vanstone, that expresses all the paradox at the heart of Christ the King. The nature of God's love and power are revealed in Christ's kingship, who reigns as crucified Lord:

Morning glory, starlit sky, Leaves in springtime, swallow's flight,
Autumn gales, tremendous seas, Sounds and scents of summer night.
Soaring music, tow'ring words, Art's perfection, scholar's truth,
Joy supreme of human love, memory's treasure, grace of youth.
Open, Lord, are these thy gifts, 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.
Drained is love in making full, Bound in setting others free;
Poor in making many rich; Weak in giving power to be.
Therefore He who Thee reveals Hangs, O Father, on that Tree
Helpless; and the nails and thorns Tell of what Thy love must be.
Thou art God; no monarch Thou Thron'd in easy state to reign;
Thou art God, Whose arms of love Aching, spent, the world sustain.

