

ADDRESS FOR SUNDAY 25TH NOVEMBER 2018

SUNDAY NEXT BEFORE ADVENT

CHRIST THE KING

Today the church's year has come full circle. We began last Advent by preparing for the coming of Jesus both at his birth into our world and at his second coming. We've followed him through his life and ministry, we've watched him and listened to him as he spelled out the Good News for us in words and action, as he suffered and died and rose again, and finally returned to the heavenly Kingdom from whence he came. And today we honour him as Christ the King.

The readings laid down in the Lectionary for today describe a circle too. The reading from the book of Daniel describes the prophet's vision of the Son of Man entering heaven and receiving power and authority from the Almighty. The reading from Revelation – which we didn't have - refers again to that vision, and to the second coming of Christ the King, and also reminds us in no uncertain terms just who and what the Almighty is. **“I am the Alpha and the Omega” says the Lord, who is and who was and who is to come**”. In other words, the beginning and the end of all created things, all existence, all thoughts and ideas, all love, all hope. God is, and always has been, and always will be, for ever.

These are awe-inspiring word pictures. The sheer power and glory of God and of His Son is perhaps too "other-wordly" for us to begin to imagine. But the reading from John's gospel reminds us that the fulfilment of these heavenly prophecies, the completion of the circle, was only made possible by the *earthly* life of God Incarnate. Not a remote deity, but a God who always has been, and is, and always will be totally involved with His world. In Jesus' conversation with Pilate we get the truth about God's kingdom in a nutshell.

It was a truth that Pilate couldn't begin to grasp, because the man who was brought before him on a charge of treason was a complete contradiction of everything that, in his eyes, stood for authority and power. As Roman Governor, Pilate represented all the authority of the most powerful nation on earth. And what we know about him, even before he met Jesus, illustrates what that meant as far as he was concerned. The fact that he hated the Jews and everything connected with them, their country, their culture and their religion, had already been demonstrated on at least three occasions, by insensitive action or downright brutality. But in Pilate's mind that would have been an entirely justifiable use of power, because he would have known that two hundred years earlier the great Jewish leader, Judas Maccabaeus, had established his dynasty by a military revolution, and that Herod the Great had done the same thing much more recently. If Pilate wanted to keep his job, he couldn't risk anything like that happening again, and the Jewish leaders seemed to be saying that it could happen if the man who stood before him was allowed to go on living. So, Pilate was no doubt surprised and relieved when he first set eyes on Jesus, because the man obviously

couldn't be taken seriously, and certainly not as any kind of threat. He was poor, for a start, and his followers, far from encouraging a revolution on his behalf, had all run away when he was arrested. In Pilate's experience, those things didn't add up to any kind of power, never mind kingship. So it was probably with amused condescension that he put the question "Are you the King of the Jews?"

But from then on it was downhill all the way for Pilate, because throughout the ensuing conversation, Jesus was in control. He put the ball firmly back in Pilate's court with a question of his own. "Is that your own idea, or have other people told you about me?" And when Pilate began to bluster that Jesus must have done something wrong because his own people had handed him over, instead of grovelling in terror and begging for mercy, Jesus spoke with calm assurance and absolute conviction about his kingdom, and his destiny which was to bear witness to the truth. And the Greek word for **witness** can also mean *martyr*. For Pilate, the truth simply meant earthly power and authority. But for Jesus, the truth meant self-sacrifice for the salvation of his people.

With reference to Jesus' statement about his kingdom, it has been suggested by at least one theologian that some translations can be misleading, because "My Kingdom is not *of* this world" implies that it is completely *other-wordly*, a spiritual or heavenly kingdom that had nothing to do with our present world at all. That interpretation would certainly suit those who, like Pilate, are inclined to dismiss Jesus as an impractical dreamer, whose teaching about an after-life is an impossible myth. On the other hand, there are those who have been described as being so heavenly minded they're no earthly use! They're so busy looking forward to life in the heavenly kingdom that they miss out on the glory and challenge of living - and the fact that's there's work to be done on earth!

Certainly Jesus believed in an afterlife, and taught his disciples to believe in it too. But he also taught them to pray that God's kingdom would come *on earth as it is in heaven*. With that in mind, a more accurate translation of Jesus' words to Pilate would be "My Kingdom is not *from* this world - saying in effect that his kingdom is not based on this world's concepts of power and authority, but at the same time affirming that it is *for* the world. And that makes sense - it's the whole point of the Incarnation, which we start to think about next week. God sent His Son into the world to establish His kingdom *on earth*, and His Son sent his followers into the world to ensure that the kingdom grew. And God's kingdom is still growing wherever Jesus reigns as king in the hearts of those who love him.

And therein lies the message for us on the last Sunday of the church's year. There are many today who don't understand what the kingdom of God is about any better than did Pilate, or indeed those religious leaders who handed Jesus over to him. The present state of our world bears witness to the awful damage human concepts of power and authority can do. But the reading from Revelation tells us that by his death and resurrection, Jesus gives to those who believe power and authority of a very different kind. **He made us to be a priestly kingdom, a whole community united in**

love and service to God. He made us to be a bridge between God and the world.

As Christians we have the great privilege and the great responsibility of spreading the good news of a king whose love and power and authority, while not *of* this world is certainly *for* it, as God, the Alpha and the Omega, intended it to be from the beginning. And that is not only our faith for the **present**, it is our hope for the **future**, especially at this time when fundamental terrorism, with its wickedly distorted ideas about the nature of God, has become a global threat. We have a Servant King, who showed us by example what God's kingdom is all about. He taught us to pray that the kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven, and the only way that we, as his servants, can show what the kingdom means for us, and help other people to make sense of it, is perfectly expressed in these words of St Teresa of Avila:

"Christ has no body now on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which is to look out Christ's compassion to the world; yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good; yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now."

As a blueprint for discipleship, that seems to say it all.

Amen.