



Revd Ro's Reflection on Christ the King

Year A

Ephesians 1.15-23

Matthew 25.31-46

In the lectionary, the Sunday before Advent is known as 'Christ the King'. It is a comparatively new feast day. It is the last Sunday of the liturgical year, next week, Advent Sunday marks the beginning of the church's New Year and we move in our readings from year A to B.

I began writing these Reflections about Easter 2020. It was in lockdown, all the churches were closed and as yet no services were broadcast. I began writing them as a focus for people's private worship Sunday by Sunday and it has continued from there. They were catalogued on the Wigginton web page from the start of year B so now, having completed this cycle of Year A, the catalogue of lectionary readings is complete and this is the final Reflection. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to do this week by week and thank you to everyone who has supported me in it.

There are so many reasons for calling Jesus King. I remember saying in one of my Reflections how, as a youngster in Sunday school; I had to memorise the end of Matthew's gospel for an exam. It was Jesus' last words to his disciples after his resurrection and is known as 'The Great commission.' It was a short passage and began with the words,

¹⁸ 'And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.'
(Matthew 28)

Well, those few words of Jesus sums it all up. He is the ruler of all things on earth, but also as the second person of the Trinity, of all creation.

The readings chosen for this morning are about Jesus' kingship. Throughout these Reflections we have been looking at Paul's epistles. Last week it was Thessalonians, the reading from this week is from his letter to the Ephesians and I can quite see why it has been set for this Sunday. It is all about Christ's kingship. In fact some translations of the bible use the words 'King Jesus' throughout this chapter.

Ephesians belongs to the group called 'The Prison Letters' those written while Paul was in captivity. Paul wrote several epistles from Ephesus during his imprisonment there. This letter to the Ephesians was believed to have been written while Paul was in prison in Rome between A.D. 62-64.

Paul faced the problem of loss of liberty and at times we can sense his depression and yet for most of the time as he addresses those first Christians, his tone is upbeat, think of Acts 16 and the story of Paul's imprisonment at Philippi,

²⁵ 'Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening.' During his times of imprisonment Paul rejoices in the fact that he is carrying out Christ's mission and can share in Jesus' sufferings and indeed the persecutions of the first Christians. Paul's message to them is have courage, you are not alone, others have suffered as you are doing. More than that though, you are not alone because Jesus is with us in our lives and especially in troubled times. We need to keep that last phrase in mind throughout our lives.

We have covered a good deal of Paul's epistles during this year. We have seen how he examined Christian theology and taught the early Christians of the power of God and of Jesus who died, who rose from the dead and who won salvation for us. Ephesians seems to give an overview of all his teaching. Some scholars believe it is not by St. Paul but a follower at a later date. The epistle opens with these words,

¹ 'Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.'

Apparently in the earliest manuscripts the word Ephesus is missed out and was added later.

However Paul did write letters which were for districts, to be passed around. If we think of this a bit like a 'round robin' then there is no reason why he should have included the word. So then let's look at this early passage from Ephesians.

Ephesus in Paul's day was a thriving Greek city port; it was a centre for trade, government and power under Roman control. The goddess Artemis was widely venerated throughout Greece, There was a huge temple dedicated to her worship in Ephesus. In fact this caused a great deal of trouble for Paul and his followers, two being taken by the crowd shouting 'Artemis of the Ephesians.' Paul was accused of preaching against her worship. He was imprisoned in Ephesus for some time. The Romans of course had brought their culture and deities. Paul spent almost three years there from (c.53-56.) The Christian community grew rapidly in Ephesus and became very strong. It is to this community Paul is writing.

The first part of the chapter is very well worth reading, in it Paul gives an overview of his teaching and the promises of God given through his grace and won for us in Jesus Christ. Paul writes at verse 13,

¹³ 'In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴ this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.'

Paul begins our reading for today by addressing the Christians in Ephesus with obvious affection.

¹⁵ 'I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.'

It is obvious that they are faithful, not only in their belief in Jesus but also in that they live out Jesus' teaching in their lives. Paul puts prayer at the centre, as it should be for every Christian. He thanks God for them but goes on,

¹⁷ 'I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom

and revelation as you come to know him.'

The power working in their lives, indeed in all our lives, is the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus, the risen Christ, has promised 'I am with you always.' It is that power Paul is emphasising because it is only by that power that we can achieve what God wants. It is through that power that 'the eyes of their hearts will be enlightened.'

The rest of the chapter is so like the Christ prayer in Philippians. For that reason I am quoting the end of the passage in full.

²⁰ 'God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²² And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.'

Jesus' equality with God is quite clearly stated. He is Christ the King not only of the earth but of all creation. The central thing is that Jesus died but was raised from the dead. That is a huge claim. Imagine how counter cultural this was for those first believers, no wonder they were persecuted. Jesus died for humanity on the cross and rose again for us to win salvation. That is the centre of our belief and of Paul's teaching. Without the resurrection Paul says we 'are of all people most to be pitied.' So, the resurrection of King Jesus is central to our faith. Jesus is God and man.

In humility Jesus took on human form uniting it to his divinity, not a prince, not living a life of privilege but

'taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness' He was exalted and is one with God and the Holy Spirit.

9 '...God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name
that is above every name,

10 so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 and every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.' (Philippians 2)

Now compare this to the end verses of our reading for today. Paul is at pains to stress that Jesus is Lord over all. That is why every knee should bow at the name of Jesus. Not incidentally, at the name of the Emperor who demanded it and who thought of himself as a god. No, there is only one Lord and that is Jesus. These first Christians were to find themselves living out these lines because they would not bow down to the Emperor, they would only confess that Jesus Christ was Lord and God. For many of them it meant death. These words of Paul are central to Christian belief and action. Paul takes this further at verse eight just prior to today's passage.

'With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.'

Jesus will come at the end when God's new creation is perfected, to judge the living and the dead. Jesus is God's Messiah; this is his role. We say this in our creed week by week. The power that raised Jesus will transform the whole world. That power is what Paul refers to in our reading; it is available

to us now and that perfection is seen in Jesus. All who live in him and in his way are working towards that new creation when King Jesus will come to judge the earth. How well this leads us on to our gospel reading.

We have seen in the last few readings Jesus' parables dealing with those who reject his message and refuse to accept him as the long awaited Messiah. It is the Jewish religious leaders who come in for most of his condemnation. It is fairly easy to identify who the foolish bridesmaids are.

It is important not to rush into any conclusions about the reading for today. Commonly known as the 'sheep and the goats.' To begin with this is not a parable. Jesus begins with an image but then goes on to a clear passage of teaching.

Mum and I have just watched the film, 'Sister Act' again. It is certainly a humorous film and we all need that! I have used it to illustrate a couple of sermons. It has many layers of meaning. On one level Delores the casino singer would be dismissed as a goat while the mother superior is quite definitely a sheep. However Delores transforms the convent for the better just as much as the sisters transform her. At the end of the film when captured by the gangster who wants to kill her she says two things. 'I forgive you Vince' and 'You'll be judged, we all will.' There are layers of meaning in this film just like an onion, the more you look the more you see.

The similarity between Delores' words and our reading today struck me. The story is of course known as the final judgement. The passage begins 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, and then he will sit on the throne of his glory.' Much of mediaeval theology is centred on this. Think of the mystery plays, of art and poetry. The church walls would be painted with pictures of the last judgement. But this is a picture, an illustration, no one knows just how this will happen.

Jesus will come again to judge the nations. We saw last week Paul's image of this and it is very similar to Matthew's here. This is an image of the end time, of God's new creation. Week by week in the creed we say, 'He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.' But how and when this will be we simply do not know. Both Jesus and Paul make that clear time and time again.

If we think about our world we see war, injustice, cruelty, abuse and the bullying of innocent people. Evil is rife, not just on a global or national level but at every level. The central baptismal promise is, 'I turn from sin and turn to Christ. Justice and right should be the aim of every Christian, indeed of every person. I love this verse from Amos, 'Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.' Amos 5.24

That is exactly what is happening in this gospel passage. This is the beginning of God's new age; this is the time when the nations will be judged. But it would be foolish to be glib about this. To begin with, just who are the sheep and who are the goats? Well Jesus says,

³⁴'Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;'

Those who believe in Jesus and who have followed him, sometimes at great peril, at great personal cost, they are the ones who will inherit the promises of God.

It is not enough to say I believe, we have to live it out in our lives. Much of what Jesus says is concerned with how we treat one another. You cannot say you love God and then harm your neighbour. And who is my neighbour? 'Everyone' is Jesus' answer. He goes further,

⁴⁰“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

There are of course stories to illustrate this, think of Martin of Tours, an ordinary soldier in the Roman army who gave half his cloak to a beggar then had a dream that he saw Christ who was wearing that same cloak. It is the idea that Jesus is in every person. It was a central theme in the Celtic Church; ‘Christ in mouth of friend or stranger.’ Our own St. Chad lived out his life for Jesus by living in exactly the way described here.

The other point about the story is that those who do good to others do so without any thought of reward. They do so because they truly care for those who suffer, because it is the right thing to do, because they are obeying the new commandment, ‘Love one another as I have loved you.’

³⁷ ‘Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?

Whereas those who neglect others have this as their excuse,

⁴⁴“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?”

In other words if we had known we would have acted differently. Their actions depend upon getting something out of it. It does not stem from care for their fellows. Really they are motivated only by what they want.

Sadly of course it goes much further than that. Not only do people neglect what they should do to help others, they wantonly damage and injure them. The point is you cannot say you love God or that you are a Christian unless you live your life according to the teachings of Jesus. The message is stark,

⁴⁵“Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”

⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

Jesus is not simply talking about those who have not recognised him at the time, he is saying if you say you are a Christian then live it out. Hypocrisy has no place with him.

We are all challenged in this passage. It is not about saying the judgement is for others, though of course Jesus is referring to those who have persecuted the church and others. That is just one level of meaning. The challenge for us is to ask, ‘How do I live my life?’ Do I truly care for others or have my actions caused hurt to someone?

Of course judgement is not only for the end time it is for now. God sees what we do, he sees our motives, he knows what is in our hearts and he judges that. Not only that but we are well aware of what we are doing, whether our actions are in tune with the teachings of Jesus and our own consciences. We judge our own actions all the time according to the teachings of Jesus and when we are out of line with them we need to do something about it.

Jesus is the God who loves us, who forgives us our sins if we turn to him and try to do better, to care for others as he has taught us.

We cannot tell when or how Jesus will judge the nations but we have his life and his teachings. We have promised to love and serve God our Father and to follow Jesus’ teachings and example. We need to do that to the best of our ability, putting selfish concerns aside.

As we approach Advent the end time will be a central theme as we look for the coming of our King Jesus. This hymn came to mind.

'The day in whose clear shining light all wrong shall stand revealed, when justice shall be throned in might and every hurt be healed.' Frederick Lucian Hosmer

