

Sermon for Festival of Christ the King 22nd Nov 2015

'Three ways to describe Christ's distinctive sovereignty in these difficult times' by Mark Pilgrim

Is God in command in these difficult days in which we are living?

Innocent people are being ruthlessly killed in their hundreds in Paris and now Mali in recent days, over the Sinai desert earlier this month and in Ankara, Turkey the month before. It is absolutely bewildering to me – and I imagine to you as well – that these atrocities are being carried out in the name of the one God who, in our different ways, Jews, Christians and Muslims all worship.

What is terrible is that these atrocities outside the Middle East are routinely occurring in the Middle East itself, not only in Syria and Iraq but in neighbouring countries as well. Man's inhumanity to man seems to have just as little boundary now in 2015 as it did 100 years ago in 1915, at the height of the First World War. Have we learned nothing in the last 100 years?

In some ways: no – and in some ways: yes. Let's look at something where we might have learned a bit.

Today's festival of Christ the King is a 20th Century creation. If, like me, some of you have wondered 'Where has this Feast of Christ the King come from? I don't remember celebrating it 30 years or so ago' you would be right.

Today's focus on Christ the King came about when Pope Pius 13th in the early 1920's wanted to do something to counteract the despair and lack of hope sweeping the world following the appalling bloodshed of the First World War. Confidence in human beings' ability to do good things was at a terribly low ebb. The 1919 'flu epidemic had killed huge numbers of people as well. Still adjusting to the implications of Darwin's Theory of Evolution, much of the content of the Bible was being questioned for its accuracy and relevance. Many theologians were emphasising the humanity of Jesus and sometimes denying his divinity – in a movement which became known as 'The Search for the Historic Jesus'. Pope Pius decided to do something about this. In a move which echoed Papal activity in the 1200's when understanding of Holy Communion was at a low ebb and the Feast of Corpus Christi was established in 1260, Pius 13th invited Christians everywhere, starting with the Roman Catholic Church, to focus on and celebrate God's eternal sovereignty revealed in Jesus, 'Christ the King'.

The festival was first celebrated in 1925 and made its way into Church of England services in 1991 through the publication of a supplement to the Alternative Services Book, 'The Promise of his Glory'. So that, by the way, is how we come to be celebrating Christ the King every year now.

The vital thing for us to understand and tell others is that Christ's sovereignty is spectacularly different to the sovereignty, to the power and rule which we see people seek to exercise now and in much of history.

Jesus alerts Pilate – and, through Pilate, all of us – to this when he says, in today's Gospel 'My kingdom is not from this world.' In other words Christ's kingship is not sourced from the fallible things of this world: his kingdom, his kingship or sovereignty is rooted, founded and sourced in the Creator of the Universe, of all time and eternity – God. It is a 'category different' kingship. It is a mind-bendingly different take on and concept of power and how one can and should 'rule'. The key ingredient is this: sacrifice. The key ingredient is being humble about your own desires so that the good and the God in other people's choices might have their space. The key ingredient is being able to absorb the hurt and bad things that other people mete out, even if it means dying, confident that this reflects God's own activity and trusting that God's love and mission is developed through it. Sacrifice. Humility. Absorbing hurt. Three key features of Christ's distinct, utterly unique, 'not of this world' sovereignty and kingship.

These truths about God revealed in Christ have always been there. In many ways we don't or shouldn't need the Festival of Christ the King to remind us of them. They are there for us to contemplate on Christmas Day, Good Friday, Easter Day and every other day of the year too. But such is the nature of our times in the 20th and 21st Centuries – in 1925 and, 90 years later, in 2015 – it seems right and understandable to me that we should focus on Christ's particular sovereignty so that we can tell not only ourselves but describe it also to others.

What are the key ingredients I am suggesting again? **Sacrifice. Humility. Absorbing hurt.**

Christ's sovereignty, Christ's kingship, Christ's power lies in... sacrifice; humility; absorbing hurt.

The emergence in the church's year of this focus on Christ's kingship is a positive development – something we can say we are doing differently in the face of man's inhumanity to man. What else have we learned or not learned in the last 100 years? Let's take a 'no' point.

The availability of lethal weapons, of guns and bomb materials, and the willingness of people, especially those in their 20's, to act without regard to the good or the God in other people show that, in some respects, little, if anything, has been learned.

Is it as unimaginable to you as it is to me that, in this day and age, there should be groups of people seemingly now almost throughout the world who are intent on fermenting war on a global scale in order to bring an end to human history as we know it on the presumption that their particular theology will prevail? The scale of the problem has been poured over endlessly this week in the media.

One conversation I heard on the radio and found useful was at the end of Radio 4's Today programme on Wednesday. A Muslim woman, representing a moderate, anti-radicalisation group called Inspire, pointed out that Islam didn't have a monopoly on barbaric groups perverting theology in our own time. She reminded us that the Klu Klux Klan in America was and is a perverted Christian group – and, in her estimation, the tiny proportion of Muslims that follow so-called Islamic State are describable in exactly the same way 'psychotic nutters'.

The critical issue is that, with social media and technology, those purveying such perversions can now reach straight into the homes and hearts of vulnerable people. Rootless, isolated people are all too willing to throw their allegiance behind a group offering certainty, security and the prospect of an unimaginably better, even heavenly, life based on a misconception of the past and a fantasy about the future.

A sentence from the end of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 7 that I heard at Morning Prayer this week leapt out at me in relation to this issue: 'Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord'' said Jesus 'will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my father in heaven.'

How do we do the will of God? Those three features we isolated earlier encapsulate it: what were they?

Sacrifice. Humility. Absorbing hurt. Sacrifice is putting other people before yourself. Humility is acknowledging you haven't got all the answers. Absorbing hurt is giving people time and space to express anger, frustration and opinions different to you. Do whatever it takes for the good and the God in other people to grow and to flourish. It is particularly appropriate that we celebrate Christ's kingship in these difficult times today.

Remember: God's sovereignty and Christ's kingship is categorically different to power generally exercised by humans today. Its three hallmarks are.... **Sacrifice. Humility. Absorbing hurt.** In giving thanks to a predecessor of Pope Francis for being innovative and offering the Christian community this focus on the nature of Christ's kingship 90 years ago, let us, today, also celebrate the prescience, wisdom and descriptive power of St John of Patmos who, in our first reading from Revelation, looked forward and wrote:

'Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'

I end with this invitation: first silently to read the words from Revelation 1 on the Weekly Sheet – and then, when I suggest, for us all to read them, as a prayer of acclamation and thanksgiving for Christ's unique sovereignty over our and all life: **To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.**