

## Suffering and triumph

The sermon given by Rev Sheila Cameron at the St Margaret's Sung Eucharist on 20 November 2022, the feast of Christ the King

The readings were: Jeremiah 23:1-6; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43



Checking up on the liturgical colour for the day, I was pleased to note that we had a choice of gold or red. Red is a colour that many churches don't use very often, but we may see it in use throughout November. Red is the colour of martyrdom, and therefore many churches will use it on Remembrance Sunday, and it's optional from All Saints' right through to St Andrew's Day on 30 November.

It does seem appropriate to be attired in red this week, for our passage from Luke for the festival of Christ the King takes us into the story of his sacrificial death upon the Cross. Unlike the reading from Matthew that the lectionary appoints for this festival in Year A – that is, *next* year – today (the last in Year C) we're not shown a picture of Christ in glory judging the world, seated on the throne of heaven surrounded by choirs of angels and resplendent in the bejewelled crown with the orb and sceptre favoured by the early church (and still by the Orthodox Church), but rather a human Jesus who was expected by his heavenly Father to drink the bitter cup of suffering and death. The brutality of the cross is not veiled by clouds of glory today; here is Jesus at Golgotha, his disciples

unable to comprehend what is happening to him, with Peter's resolve to follow him anywhere, whatever the outcome, now shattered. Here is the man Jesus, King of the Jews, tortured, mocked and executed by the Romans.

One of the oldest surviving texts in English brings together these contrasting images of Christ the King in an imaginative unity. This is a poem called *The Dream of the Rood*. It demonstrates in powerful and harrowing imagery that the glory of Christ is not far removed from the suffering of the cross. The poet has a dream of a magnificent cross, decorated with gold and silver and precious stones, which he gazes at in wonder. It makes him feel very small and insignificant until, as he gazes, his vision changes, and he begins to see blood oozing from the grain of the wood. And then the cross starts to speak to him and tell him the story of how, of all the trees in the forest, it was the one chosen to bear the body of Christ. The cross tells the poet how, after the Crucifixion, it was cut down and thrown into a rubbish pit, but the followers of Jesus found it and raised it up again and decorated it with gold and





silver and precious stones, as symbols of that healing and renewal of life that are the true and most treasured possessions of Christians. What to me is most striking about that poem is not the transformation of a cruel instrument of torture into a symbol of triumph, but the way the poet conveys his profound understanding of the story. This gruesome object, the cross, is the place where God participated in our mortality most fully and transformed it. Suffering and triumph are both present in the same vision, blending into one another. If we don't see that, then the opulent symbols of Christ the King, the priceless treasures that surround him in the church's tradition, may be things that leave us cold or make us feel, like the poet, very small and insignificant.

Christ the King is the God who lived among us and shared our humanity. If we are to represent his kingdom and make it visible among us, then we must show God's concern for those who struggle in this world: the poor, the lonely, the rejected, the vulnerable and the suffering. Our reading from Jeremiah speaks of shepherds who have failed – evidently kings and leaders who let the people down by not protecting or nurturing them, perhaps pursuing personal ambition or the desire for power or wealth. The sheep have been scattered and have become prey to wild animals. What are the hazards that threaten today's flocks? Country folk know that shepherds are experts in the ways of sheep, aware of all the dangers they may encounter and the diseases that may afflict them, which suggests to me that Christians should be *experts in the ways of the world* if they are to reach out to others as Christ did, with courage and empathy, and also taking the same kind of risk that led to his suffering

and death on the cross. Are we up to that challenge, prepared to live sacrificially, as we must be if we are to be effective shepherds in today's world?

The prophet Jeremiah was speaking to a people who had lost their way. His words were written when the fortunes of God's people were at a very low ebb. The good news in our text is that God is ever watchful and will not allow the people to perish: "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them" (Jeremiah 23:3). There will be a successor to the ideal shepherd king, David, "a righteous branch" who will reign wisely and bring justice and security once again. Only God can achieve this, and in the New Testament the salvation of the people comes through Christ the Good Shepherd, Christ the King. This passage reminds us that the primary work of salvation and transformation in all of our lives is first and foremost *the initiative of God* who comes in search of us and works to protect us. We are blessed by God's love for us and God's desire to bring us home to a place of safety. These words speak afresh to every generation of Christians.

In the Kingdom of Christ, we are not subjects, but according to Paul's amazing metaphor in Ephesians 2:19, "members of the household of God". That means we are closer to Christ than most people could hope to be to any earthly ruler. We are all members of the one family. That's the opposite of feeling small and insignificant. God has taken the trouble to rescue us, like lost sheep, and bring us from a place where we have been trapped by "the power of darkness" into a place of light, a place where we are free and where we belong and which belongs to us and to all the saints.





In our Eucharist we may speak of Christ the King in terms of splendour and honour and glory and majesty, but transcending the world can also be expressed in terms of simplicity, disengagement and self-denial, as we see in the lives of the saints who set their sights on knowing God. So, if you find “glory” an odd concept to aspire to, perhaps you might prefer the notion of detachment from the world and its conflicts and unity under the gracious rule of Christ which we find in today’s collect. The kingdom of Christ is a place where all things hold together in that harmony and unity that God intended from the beginning. For as Paul puts it in Colossians 1, “in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible ... all things have been created through him and for him ... [and] in him all things hold together.”

On the other hand, you may find “glory” a very meaningful concept indeed: God’s gracious reward for a faithful life constrained by suffering or self-sacrifice, the freedom and joy which surely are at the heart of any idea of heaven that we may entertain.

Today we pray for the coming of his Kingdom of unity and peace, of freedom and joy.

Amen.

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