The Servant King

A sermon by Revd Richard Carter

Reading: Jer. 23. 1-6, Col. 1. 11-20, Luke 23. 33-43

Some of you may know that my youngest Brother Daniel is a production manager for HLA a film company which makes documentaries and advertisements. For the last two months he has been working, many hours a day, on the latest Christmas Advertisement for Amazon Prime. It was released last Wednesday during Coronation Street. Now Daniel being a good St Martin’s Christian was a bit worried about producing an advertisement for a company criticised for its failure to pay taxes and slightly anxious too about the idea Amazon had come up with involving a priest and imam. He knew that the only way to make the story line work was to make it real and authentic – not an actor playing the priest or the imam, but a real priest a real imam, and that the location should be a real Vicarage a real church, a real mosque. And so he went to endless lengths to find the real people and authentic characters to fit the narrative - the priest from Paddington Green Church Gary Bradley, the Imam from a Muslim School in Leicester Zubir Hassam. They sought advice both from the Church of England and the Muslim Council of Great Britain – Daniel my brother also spent 18 years growing up in a Vicarage and 8 years at 6 St Martin’s Place so he knows the territory! They wanted to show a genuine dignity, sensitivity and respect.

It begins with a ring (a ding dong) on the Vicarage doorbell, a slightly elderly Vicar opens and welcomes a slightly elderly Imam who has come to visit with an embrace – they are obviously good friends. He shows him into the sitting room where they sit down for a cup of tea together where they chat affectionately but as they both get up from their chairs it is obvious that their knees are aching from too much kneeling and they chuckle sympathetically. The film cuts to both vicar and imam ordering a gift of knee pads from Amazon for each other and laughing when the postman arrives as they realise they have both bought each other the same gift. The final shot is of the vicar putting on his knee pads and kneeling down reverently in front of the altar to pray, while the imam also clad in his new knee pads under his robes reverently bows down to pray in the mosque. It is simple and heart-warming and the advertisement has caused a social media storm.

The Independent commented: “Amazon pushes a message of interfaith friendship at a divisive time in the UK and US”. The Guardian reported that against a backdrop of the British vote to leave the EU and Donald Trump’s victory in the US this advertisement showing the exchange of gifts between a Muslim and Christian is about “selflessness and thinking of other people”. Harun Khan, Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain, said: “It is brilliant, highlighting an example of the strong friendships that exist between many Christians and Muslims across the country.”. Al Jazeera last night featured a ten minute interview with the Imam from Leicester. USA today reported – “The most surprising thing about Amazon’s advert is that it appears to be the first time a Muslim cleric has been featured in a television ad shown in the United States.” Since going on air all knee pads have sold out.

It seems to me that whatever you think of Amazon- what has touched so many people is that the advertisement is a simple parable of human kindness that crosses boundaries. And with it the realization of how it is with the simplest actions that we overcome the fences that divide - a visit, a chat, a joke, a chuckle, a cup of tea, the sharing of the difficulties we face, a hand on the shoulder, an embrace, a gift, a prayer for another. Actions that every single one of us can do as second nature. For several weeks the St Martin’s International Group have been holding a course here at St Martin’s on listening skills and relationship building. We were asked to draw a circle around ourselves to indicate the boundaries we draw when interacting with others and we reflected on these boundaries. One of those in the group gave the example of stewarding for St Martin’s. She
told the story of how earlier in the day she had seen someone who was obviously homeless on the steps of St Martin's. He had his bags everywhere. She described how she squatted down and talked to him, as friendly as possible, and then began to move his bags out of the way of the steps and the entrance to the church, she thought helpfully. But the man became extremely angry and upset and told her not to touch his things. As we reflected on this situation we began to see how actually what was taking place was a conflict of territory. For the steward the steps were St Martin's steps—they needed to be clear in order for people to come into the church. She thought she was helping the man. Subconsciously this was our territory and she was sensitively (she thought) helping him out of the way. But for the man, the steps were his territory—the place where he had slept the night and his bags were his private property—in this case more than that, they were his home—his sleeping bag etc. What becomes obvious is how upset we can become when we feel that our territory is being infringed upon or threatened. Just think about it for a moment.

How many of the tensions and conflicts in our world at the moment are about the anger and the violence that breaks out when territory is threatened, or invaded or attacked. Actually if we look at this on an individual level we can notice how we ourselves may respond when we feel our territory is being taken away: the person at work who doesn’t respect our authority or dedication or tries to take over or control us; the guest who does not show gratitude; the train which is far too full so that the person with a season ticket can’t find a space; the person who pushes into the queue in front of us; the family member who never tidies the house or cleans your basin; the friend who enjoys your hospitality but never reciprocates; the person who threatens your job, the neighbours next door who are building an ugly extension far too close to the fence. ‘Who do they think they are?!’ All these scenarios are examples of where our territory is threatened. The boundaries we fear that others may cross—like the English Channel. I found it an incredibly valuable discussion.

Straight afterwards with my renewed understanding I went upstairs onto my landing where a kind member of St Martin’s was depositing a huge box of second hand clothes for refugees. ‘You can’t put it there I’m afraid’ I heard myself say ‘But it’s for the refugees’ she responded in amazement ‘It might be, but this is my landing and there are no refugees actually living on my landing only your boxes’ I felt like telling her ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself’. ‘You've got to think of yourself’ —like the English Channel. I found it an incredibly valuable discussion.

But what happens when that’s taken to a terrible extreme—when its whipped up and fueled by fear and prejudice and mistrust—isn’t racism about defending territory too, or hate crime against people of a different faith, or violence against people of a different gender or sexuality, today is the day when we are asked to remember the huge rise in hate crime against transgender people. Taken to its terrifying brutal extreme—in the heads of people like Bashar al-Assad isn’t dropping bombs on Aleppo justified as defending territory?

Today we celebrate Christ the King. And the radical thing about his kingdom is that it’s not a territory that he defends—in fact the kingdom of this world he seems ready to give away completely. And he talks of a kingdom to come which the most unlikely people, even a thief on a cross is invited to share. It is in fact quite an astonishing act of offering that never ceases to challenge us. In today’s Gospel, Jesus on the cross, is stripped seemingly of all assets and authority and he is repeatedly mocked for his powerlessness: ‘He saved others but he cannot save himself if he is the Messiah God’s chosen one’ ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself.’ How completely opposite Jesus is to the contenders for leadership in our world—he does not defend his territory. Perhaps that’s what Judas was hoping he would do. No, quite the opposite he seems to be opening himself up for attack—symbolically opening his arms up—naked on the cross—sacrificing his very life for the world. How pathetic is what the bystanders shout. He pretends to be the saviour but cannot even save himself. Here he is nailed to a cross the symbol of defeat. He has lost everything, no territory, no defense, no religion to defend him, not even any friends. On the cross he embodies humanities greatest fear. This is the place where his misguided love and mercy has led. He is the visible sign of weakness and failure. Jesus have nothing, even your clothes have been gambled away, and you don’t even have territory enough for your own grave. And do not those same voices taunt us today too. “You’ve got to think of yourself”, “you will lose everything,” “your mercy leads nowhere”, “your liberalism is a burst bubble”, “your compassion is sentimental, ineffectual, even worse dangerous.” “Protect! Defend! Scroungers! Illegals! Shut your doors! Make the nation
great again! We want our territory back! Get rid! Put up your fences! Throw out those who threaten. Your Christian love is weakness - it leads to the place of the scull.”

And yet here, here also is the recognition of another truth. It is here, here with him, that if only I have the courage I want to be too. Because he has not lost the kingdom we have - it is he who embodies a way and a truth and a life - that one of the thieves glimpses too “He has done nothing wrong” Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom. And here in the hour and agony of his death Jesus is still opening up that kingdom- today you will be with me in paradise.

There is hope in this. There is hope for everyone, even for Donald Trump. It is in fact never too late to recognise the love of God and a power beyond all human power. God’s weakness is so much greater than human strength. Christ is the king even on the cross, the servant king.

So what’s all this got to do with an imam and a priest sharing friendship, a cup of tea, a gift and a prayer? Everything. That sharing is the meaning of Eucharist. Do this Jesus said “in remembrance of me.” What does Jesus say to us at this time in our history? Perhaps he is saying that it is at this time that we become his disciples again not locked in an upper room defending our institution or ransacked territory fearful for what we might lose, but allowing the Holy Spirit to enable us to speak the language of all nations; breaking down walls that divide like those seemingly powerless first Christians did.

Come see his hands and his feet, the scars that speak of sacrifice: hands that flung stars into space, to cruel nails surrendered. “Who do you think you are!” This is our God, the servant king, who calls us now to follow him- to bring our lives as a daily offering...of worship to the servant king.

To see the advertisement about the priest and imam go to: https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/nov/16/amazon-tv-ad-imam-vicar-exchanging-gifts