



## Christ the King

A sermon given by Revd Richard Carter

### Readings: Colossians 1.11-20; Luke 23.33-43

Like many of you, I grew up in the Anglican Church, and *The Book of Common Prayer* entered my bloodstream. There are still whole bits of the 1662 order of Holy Communion I know off by heart. We still use this liturgy at 8.00am on Sundays at St Martin's and, while I would not want to use it all the time, and love the new liturgies of Common Worship, the Book of Common Prayer has a great beauty. When I celebrate with these words it's as though they are reading themselves, and I can remember my father saying them. They have a rhythm and a music. It is a beauty resonating with our past, the history of our church holding together with such poetry, scripture, reason, and tradition and arriving at an expression of a faith which has great dignity and balance. We are made aware of God's greatness and in contrast our own lives – so small in comparison. What is this God that he should be mindful of us? What is this God that he should care for us? This is a God who 'passeth human understanding'.

One of the parts of the Book of Common Prayer order of Holy Communion I love is the part which is known as "The Comfortable Words." They are just that: comfortable words, comforting, redemptive – Christ the saviour, to whom we can return, however bad the journey, however much we feel we've messed things up.

These are the words:

'Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all that truly turn to him.

Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you.

So God loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

Hear also what Saint Paul saith.

This is a true saying and worthy of all men to be received that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Here also what Saint John saith.

If any man sin, we have an advocate with the father, Jesus Christ the righteous and he is the propitiation for our sins.'

I remember as a child enjoying the sound of that word 'propitiation' for our sins. I had no idea what the word meant but I liked it anyway.

What I am trying to say is that what I loved about these words is the way they spoke of Jesus. Not a theology I understood or could even begin to explain but Jesus Christ who said we could come to him just as we were and it was he, not us, that would make everything all right; it was he who would refresh, who would save, who would advocate for you and who would be the propitiation, whatever that meant, who would prevent from perishing and grant everlasting life. This was the God who loved us not because we were good but because God was good. Though I had no understanding of how this theory of salvation worked, I held onto a sense that somehow Jesus Christ loved you

whatever – and that somehow, though we know not how, nothing is beyond the redemptive power of God, and nothing is outside the possibilities of his love. Today we celebrate Christ the King. Eighteen years ago on this day, I was ordained and since then Christ the King has always been essential for me, for I know that not one day really would be possible without him. All the way through the Gospels Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God. It is a hard term for us to understand. He tells us “The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” He even says “The Kingdom of heaven is coming and now is.” What did he mean? When he spoke of the kingdom he was speaking of himself. God is at hand and now is. Jesus the saviour is among us. The rule of God has begun here and now not in some future age or never-never-land, not in a distant paradise, but here in our own lives and our own time and in the mess and raggedness and confusion of our own lives. Redemption has come. Christ the King is present! Expressed here is this paradox of both God’s transcendence and his immanence: the God beyond all our understanding, and at the same time the God made flesh in the midst of our lives.

Two weeks ago many of you may have heard Frances Young, the Biblical Theologian who spoke in our Autumn Education Programme. Her topic was ‘Broken and Blessed’, and the passage she chose for her exegesis was the passage where Jacob wrestles with a stranger. The stranger has often been interpreted as God. Frances Young went on to describe her own wrestling with God. Frances is the mother of a son Arthur, now 43 years old, who is profoundly mentally and physically disabled and totally dependent on his parents to care for him. Her words have stayed in my thoughts. This is what she said:

“For some including myself, wrestling with God has been a desperate plea for blessing, hanging on in there like Jacob and getting lamed in the process. For the whole nature of God is beyond human comprehension. For at the heart of the struggle with God is an experience of a loss of security and self-sufficiency and being put in one’s place. We imagine we are in control. But the point is we are mere limited creatures, vulnerable, far from in control. We think that we judge God but it is God who judges us.”

Frances Young said, “For many years I wrestled and I doubted, unable to make any sense at all – how could I go on believing in a good creator God when something had gone so wrong in the act of creating a new human being – my son. Then one day I was stopped short. I can feel that moment as I got up to the kitchen to do some ordinary everyday chore. I had a loud thought ‘It makes no difference to me whether you believe in me or not.’ And suddenly, I realised that God just is.”

She went on, “So you see, after all these years of struggling with questions, I discovered that through Arthur I have been given privileged access to the deepest truths of Christianity. I stand alongside him as a vulnerable creature, disabled and mortal. I find myself lamed and blessed. I discern God’s presence. I meet God in human form. I discover glimpses of Christ in some of the most disabled and damaged human persons.” Frances said, “Arthur, my son, ministers to me. It is with him I find the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

Since Frances Young spoke I have thought a lot about what she said. On the one hand it is just simple common sense. Ultimately, all of us are mortal, we struggle, we doubt, we do not know the answers. And yet in this very mortal struggle, we glimpse the greatest truths and God’s wisdom: that this Jesus, this king beyond all human understanding and authority is the king who is with us, down here in the manger of our lives. As Sam from Afghanistan, who was baptised at St Martin’s, answered when I asked him why he wanted to be a Christian, he said “Because Jesus is the one who knows what it is like to be me.” Jesus is the king who has come down and revealed the meaning of God, in a stable, among the outcast, the persecuted, the sick, the sinner, the grieving, at the very frayed edges of our lives. This king is the illegitimate one, the exiled one, the homeless one, the tortured, the persecuted, the betrayed, the rejected. We worship this king, lying in a cattle trough,

among the outcasts, writing in the mud, breaking and sharing bread with us, touching our vulnerability, embracing our shame, healing our deepest fears of rejection, forgiving us our most painful wrongs. Today's Gospel reveals Christ the King even on the cross – reaching out to the thief crucified with him, who recognises his kingship. Jesus, offering the kingdom of God, a share in paradise, to the thief – even at the very moment when everything else has been stripped away. Even at the place of the skull, God's kingdom can begin there. "I tell you today you will be with me in paradise."

Our own human mortality has been very much at the centre of the thoughts of many members of this church over the last few weeks because of the tragic death of Sonia, one of the much-loved members of our congregation. Many of us have struggled to come to terms with the shock and enormity of her tragic death. All I can say, without any sense of lessening that loss or trauma, or the grief that her loved ones are experiencing, is that along with many others who attended her funeral last Wednesday, I was once more made aware that even death can become the sign of love, hope and inspiration and the source of an overwhelming realisation that love lives on.

"Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom."

"Today you will be with me in paradise."

Nothing, nothing is outside the unconditional love of God, and this Kingdom of God is not somewhere out there in a place beyond us, it is here and now in this church, and out in the street, and on your way home, and as you wrestle with the pain and doubts of your lives, and as you find God's love in the places you least expected to find it. Christ the King at the torn edge of our lives as we have tried to symbolise in the new logo for this church. The King of love, even at the place you most feared. Like the thief on the cross, even the place of death can become a place of resurrection and of life, not through our own power, but because Christ, the God of love, is King.

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