

Pusey House –Christ the King (Year C)  
21<sup>st</sup> November 2010

In one of my favourite stories, a little girl is prepared for her first confession by being directed to use one of those carefully constructed examinations of conscience that you find in every proper Catholic manual of devotion. Great was her enthusiasm for this ready-made catalogue of errors. Slight was her willingness to engage with the reality of her human condition. Following the advice to the letter, she confessed to all manner of deviances and heinous crimes, and before seeking absolution she concluded by admitting that she had also been published by Darton, Longman and Todd and printed in Lillie Road, London.

An examination of conscience is commended to us at the end of each day. As Christians we do well also at the end of the liturgical year to recollect our journey under God and to commit our journey henceforward to him. Such a recollection must take place, not in a superficial exercise of recounting events but in the penetrating yet regenerative judgment of Christ the King. 'Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom.'

There is of course a danger that reflection can induce self-indulgent nostalgia and give rise to a hankering after the 'good ol' days' with their illusory securities and romanticized certainties or like the little girl in the story, lead us lazily to accept the conclusions of others without much discernment. Anticipation can give rise to superstitious fantasy and a belief that things can only get better. The earthquake in Haiti at the beginning of the year, the Deepwater Horizon explosion, the mining accident in Chile – such things might make us want to forget this past year. The unique result of the General Election in May, the revelation of the size of the budget deficit, the General Synod's decision in July might make us fearful for the future. At face value, the story of 2010 might lead us to a despondency and sense of impotence. But for the Christian, interweaving that story and our own into the eternal story of God's involvement in his world and with his people leads to a fresh perspective and a renewed prophetic vocation.

But let us turn to the deliciously absurd.

I have recently acquired a colleague. Fr Christian (he won't mind me telling you) is a 68 year old Franciscan friar. I admire his wisdom and candour. I value his love, friendship and support. I respect his nearly forty years of service in the religious life.

On his arrival in the parish, Fr Christian was summoned to the area bishop. Despite his retired status, his longevity in professed vows and his possession of a licence under seal which has seen him through at least three bishops of London, it was suggested by the area bishop that such a licence would not hold good under the provisions of the new Common Tenure. Under the measure it is alleged all clergy will enjoy the benefits of the European Working Directive excepting of course the right to strike, the right not to work on a Sunday and the right to minimum wage. The area bishop has previously deflected my objections.

'But', said the area bishop to Fr Christian, 'you will have entitlement to paternity leave'. Father's excitement at the prospect was matched only by my alarm that the parish of S Mary, Willesden should be the centre of a population surge as an elderly Franciscan, in a quest for time off, took advantage of an Episcopal endorsement.

It is to a Church bewildered and mesmerized by the shrill voices of entanglement with the standards of the present world that the Feast of Christ the King pierces the confusion and evinces the truth at the heart of our faith.

It is to a world entranced and bewitched by illiberal humanism disguised as compassion and all too willing to disparage the demands and dismiss the divine dimension in human affairs that the Feast of Christ the King re-presents the crisis – the eternal moment of decision – at which we must choose between a syncretistic leveller-ism and the sovereignty of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Conformity to prevailing ideology is no new phenomenon. The traces of God's struggle with his people are the backstory to the political idyll of David's election as King in our first reading. By universal acclaim, the rugged and handsome harp-playing shepherd son of Jesse, is hailed as the divinely appointed leader of the tribes of Israel. Notice how God is invoked as the authority for this decision. But not so long before, when Samuel had prayed to the Lord regarding the people's desire for a king, God had said to him: 'Hearken to the voice of the people...for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being King over them.' Their rebellion against the Sovereignty of God had led them to imitate the monarchical structure of the surrounding nations, to the displacement of the God who had liberated them from Egypt, who had protected them during their nomadic adventure, who had settled them in a land flowing with milk and honey. Not for the first and not for the last time, the divine plan and providence was thwarted by a human willfulness that wanted what everyone else had got, for good or ill.

For the tribes of Israel, the consequence of their hubris, of rewriting their story with a warrior-king – what seemed like an innocent aspiration to be like everyone else – would lead to division, internecine struggle, external subjugation, despoliation and exile.

Even the people of God, chosen and loved by him, can be seduced into thinking that imitation of the world can be nothing worse than harmless.

But God is not to be outmaneuvered by the capriciousness and myopia of human fancy. 'God sent his Son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law, to redeem the subjects of the Law'. The sovereignty of God is restored in the Kingship of Christ, a sovereignty that realigns the 'devices and desires of our own hearts' to the divine will for our fulfillment and integrity. 'In him we gain our freedom, the forgiveness of our sins'. 'Jesus, re-member me'. Put me back together again.

As for our second reading, the situation in Asia Minor is intriguing. The prevailing religious conditions at Colossae encouraged a syncretism between

Jewish traditions and Graeco-Roman philosophies. Paul's language reflects familiar categories of thought. Mystery cults, angelology and cosmic hierarchies are the stock-in-trade of the nascent Gnosticism that would so threaten the integrity of the early Church in the second century. The Colossians were no religious innocents. The ascetic practices and extravagant mythologies of the contemporary Phrygian culture, fused with the influence of a Jewish community settled by Antiochus the Great in 200 BC, made for a heady religious fervour. Into this mix, the advent of the Christian witness surely ticked all the boxes and proved a welcome contribution to a consumer-focussed brand of spiritual acceptability.

'He is the image of the unseen God, the first-born of all creation, for in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, Thrones, Dominations, Sovereignities, Powers. God wanted all perfection to be found in him, and all things to be reconciled through him and for him'. Music to itchy Colossian ears. But then comes the sting – 'he made peace by his death on the cross'. No matter how hard the Colossian Christians may have tried to marry the unique revelation of God in Christ with the prevailing culture in an effort, perhaps, to appear meaningful and relevant (please note the irony!), there remains what Paul elsewhere calls the stumbling block, the *scandalon* of the cross. How great is the temptation to interpret primitive experience with enlightened arrogance. I am reminded of the Ebionites, an early Jewish Christian sect. With the smallest alteration of the Greek text of scripture in the description of John the Baptist, the Ebionites, in pursuit of their vegetarian agenda, changed the word locust to cake. They replaced the strong and sometimes unpalatable meat of the Gospel for a comfortable afternoon tea.

Do not be misled by those who would have us recalibrate Kingship into the neuter abstract of Sovereignty. Christ's Kingship, universal and transcendent, is personal and particular.

So, a Christian community, struggling to find its place in the world, can become fixated on seeking a coherence that affords contemporary, but alas, transient respectability.

The death of Jesus Christ reveals his authentic Kingship – neither culturally conditioned nor esoteric, but total surrender to God, love spent, emptied, poured out to restore God's people to himself. 'If he is the Christ, let him save himself'. No. If he is the Christ, he will save others. 'Jesus, re-member me'.

Two thieves, condemned to the same fate as the King himself. One rails against him for having the power to intervene and not using it. The other, reflecting on the story of his own wrongdoing and anticipating the inevitable consequences of justice, asks nothing more than to experience the regenerative judgment of the King. 'Jesus, re-member me'. 'Put me back together again'.

The people of Israel needed constant re-remembering. As Jonathan Sacks writes, there is no word in biblical Hebrew for history, there is only memory. The story of the past is interwoven into the story of the present. It is my story. Their

Exodus is my exodus, their settlement and exile is my settlement and exile. Their restoration is my restoration. It is a story that continues to be told because it is a story that continues to be lived.

The Christians at Colossae needed constant re-remembering. The contagion of passing fads and fancies could only be countered by the appeal to the Christ-event and specifically to the scandal of his self-emptying sacrifice by which 'all things are reconciled through him and for him'. The Colossians story is my story.

The world, the Church and I need constant re-remembering. 'Jesus, put me back together again'. And how and where does this re-remembering take place if not in the very place that the King himself says he will be remembered? 'Do this to re-member me'.

As we reflect on yet another year of secular, ecclesiastical and personal dismemberment, may our reflection be wise and our anticipation prophetic in the penetrating yet regenerative judgment of Christ the King. May we reweave our story into his eternal story. 'Jesus, re-member me, as I re-member you'. Only then can the promise be appropriated: 'Today you will be with me in paradise'.