

SERMON FOR CHRIST THE KING | 24.11.2019

Jeremiah 23: 1-6; Colossians 1: 11-20; St Luke 23: 33-43

It's a bit old hat now but at some stage most of you will have seen old editions of **Dad's Army**, the mickey-take on the Home Guard of the **Second World War**. As well as the blustering incompetence of **Captain Mainwaring**, the smooth but somewhat detached **Sergeant Wilson** and the parroting commands of **Lance Corporal Jones**, every now and then we got to hear from the constantly irate **ARP Warden Hodges** and his insistent question: *'So who's in charge here then?'* Of course we know that not a single person in the group is capable of being in charge but that isn't how things work. Someone has to take the lead. But how?

By chance, I had the opportunity to be on the Falls Road in Catholic West Belfast yesterday morning. After the 10am Mass I fell into conversation with one of the congregation. I was looking for the **Clonard Monastery** where much of the **Good Friday Agreement** had been drafted. With my dog collar on, Tony had no hesitation in telling me about what it been like to live through the Troubles as a teenager. Whether from the **IRA paramilitaries** on the one hand or a bunch of drunken members of the **Para. Regiment** on the other, he had been very severely beaten up on a number of occasions and his mother's house had been burned out.

In our intercessions we pray regularly for countries where the rule of law counts for nothing or is in the hands of bigots: our prayers for **Nazanin Zaghari-Radcliffe** and **Aras Amiri**, locked up in Tehran on trumped up charges, are just one example of that. We cannot imagine the constant uncertainty that must come when you don't know whether you will be arrested in the middle of the night and any civil rights denied you.

So as a community, one of the central planks of our freedom in a democratic society is our reliance on the rule of law and on our ability to appeal to a higher authority when we have been unfairly treated. We know the system: from magistrates Court to Supreme Court and, for a short while longer, the **European Courts** too. It is all based on justice, on fairness and the right of the little person to be protected from those with authority who act selfishly, unscrupulously and against the common good.

When Jeremiah, preaching in the second half of the 7th century BC, talks of those shepherds who are only concerned about their own well-being, it was exactly the same scenario: everyone deserves to be fairly treated.

Yet while we can protest in a free society, Jeremiah knew no such freedom. He was misunderstood, hounded out of his job and his home and eventually branded a traitor. And it was this that led him to turn to God as his last, in fact his only, consolation. Stripped of everything he thought he could rely on, he began to understand – more fully than perhaps any of the Old Testament prophets, the true nature of God, the true nature of God as King.

Bishop Pete of Willesden, known to some of us because he has looked after the Stepney Area a couple of times, makes no secret of the fact that he is not just a Tottenham supporter but also a Republican. He hit the headlines when he was suspended from his duties for comments he made about Prince William and Kate Middleton at the time of their marriage. It so irritates him that we live in a monarchy whose status we can never challenge.

So - is it helpful to think of Jesus Christ as that sort of king: someone who enjoys privileges not available to the rest of us?

Only if we see beyond the trappings and into the mind of Jeremiah and especially of Jesus, the king who was also the ‘Man of Sorrows’, the suffering servant, he who would ultimately lay down his life for his people, solely out of love and respect for each of us.

Christ the King: yet born in a stable, exiled to Egypt before he could walk, the preacher who had nowhere to lay his head, the teacher who offered his disciples the freedom to choose – or to reject – everything he stood for, and ultimately the one who, as in today’s Gospel, would be nailed to a cross and still find it possible to forgive the repentant thief and offer him a home in paradise.

Clearly for Christians, any discussion of power, privilege, authority, justice or control has to have, as its root this kind of kingship. It has to work with the notion that anyone exercising any kind of leadership role has to be formed by the story we have just read, obediently following the one who gave up all semblance of naked, human control - to show us what God is really like.

So power, if that is what Church leaders think they have, is nothing more than an invitation card. As my punch line in the presentation I gave at Hanover School this week has it, the reason for Church is to make people happier. And the way to be happy is to choose to live as closely as we can to the way Jesus lived.

It isn't likely, though, that we will ever be happy in a society which is lawless. The questions to the party leaders earlier week kept on asking about honesty and integrity: *can we trust you if we elect you? Will you promise us the earth and then do what you want? Can we be sure you will be concerned about our best interests?* Tony the former Provo, walking alongside me in the rain of West Belfast yesterday, was asking the same question: *how can we help Catholics and Protestants to work together in harmony if the leaders in each of the two communities hold on to their power – for their own interests.*

Cardinal John Newman, whose writings have been pored over so much more since his canonisation last month, said that each and every form of authority must be ready to be held to account, to be questioned. And he was dead right.

So is that the way of the Church? On the face of it, we as Anglicans have Synodical systems that ensure the voice of everyone is heard. We have a PCC where everything is discussed at huge length and in great detail. It has two members who are deeply sceptical about change and innovation. And yet, as this week's PCC Minutes make clear, their views are not only heard but are honoured, tough though those discussions often are. They play a real part in what it means to be Church here.

But I am still not sure, still, we have quite grasped the example of *Christ the King* in the Church, the example of the one who has all the power but who gives it away for the good of others. We still live in a fallen community where authority is held on to with a tenacity that many of us find deeply troubling. I came back last night to find an email of shocking bureaucratic insensitivity from the Diocese about our application to rebuild the organ. As the Northern Irish slogan of the 1920s said, ‘what we have we hold’.

Yet despite the taunts and the sneering, *Christ the King* looks down from the Cross and he offers, even us, Paradise. But only if we are willing to make generosity not power our guide.