

Sunday 26 November 2006: Christ the King

The King who came down

Readings: Revelation 1. 4b-8; John 18. 33-37

I think it's often easier to remember stories, which may be why Jesus told them. We carry stories with us, recall them, open them up and see them in different contexts as we grow. One of my father's sermons which I remember, was a story, the story of the 'King who came down'.

There was once a king, who was the greatest king in all the world. He lived at the top of a high mountain. He was more powerful than anybody else, and he was rich too, for the whole world belonged to him: the land, the trees, the plants and the rivers, the hills and the valleys, even the sky with the sun by day, and the moon and the stars by night, belonged to him. And this king of ours was a good king, for he had a great love for his kingdom, and all those who lived in it. But this king had a huge problem in his life, and that problem made him deeply sad – the problem was, his people had forgotten him – they no longer listened to his voice or recognised his love. His love had become a one way thing, never returned, worse, the gifts the king had given his people had been usurped, used up, exploited for private gain. The land he had given for all had been carved up, fought over, drained of its life-giving resources. And the greed he saw in his kingdom was also leading to suffering and death. How could this king stand by, alien and remote, and watch from a distance the divisions and wars and suffering of those he loved most?

It seemed to the king that there were several options open to him.

He could use his power to threaten and terrify his people into submission. He could force them to obey by punishing those who transgressed and by rewarding the righteous. But what kind of relationship would this be? Such love felt more like oppression. There could be no freedom, no reciprocity in this, for it would ultimately be a relationship of fear.

A second alternative was to go down the mountain himself. He would retain his power but use it to convert his people. He could be a kind of super man. He would create systems and plans, structures and institutions. He would bring order and control. He would ruthlessly defeat all opposition. He would be hero, liberator, and dictator, the saviour that everyone had expected. And yet the thought filled him only with emptiness and dread.

You see, our king had a third plan. It was based on the principle of a small mustard seed: a seed which began its life as something very small and vulnerable, but something which could take root in the natural soil, and if it was loved and cared for, only then would it grow. Yes, his third plan meant that the king would have to give away his kingdom, relinquish his kingly power. He would have to become vulnerable, really vulnerable. He would have to share the lives of his people, suffer with them, risk everything, even rejection and death. And would the people love him? Would the seed grow into the greatest tree of all, in which his kingdom would find love and community and life? There was no way of telling. That was the risk.

It was the third plan the king chose. And did we love him? Did we really really love him? That is the question he is still asking.

I once performed this story of the 'King who came down', as a drama at Crayford parish church. As I told the story I took off the crown I was wearing to illustrate the humility of it all, and then the cope, and then an alb I was wearing, and then I came down from the high pulpit and told the end of the story from among the congregation. After the service, one of the old ladies in the congregation said to me "Ooh, that was different that was! When you started taking off your clothes like that, I thought you were going to go

all the way". I didn't. But Christ did. He went all the way. St. Paul put it like this: Our King 'did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant – being born in human likeness – and became obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross'. (Phil 2).

It is very different from the kind of kingly power we imagine. He seems to be risking far too much. In the Solomon Islands, where I have lived and worked for many years of my life, this model of the servant, who empties himself, this model of sacrificial love, seems very different from the ancestral faith of the past. You see, in the past, and still today, many Melanesians believe in what they call *mana*. In 1891 Robert Codrington defined *mana* thus: 'This is what works to effect everything beyond the ordinary power of men – it is a power believed to be present in the atmosphere and to be attached to persons and to things. A person can possess this power and direct it. Melanesian religion consists in getting this power for oneself and getting it used for one's own benefit'. This concept of *mana*, of winning power and using it for one's own advantage seems wholly different from the concept of a 'King who came down'. And yet if we are truthful, how free are our own present day religions from this same kind of desire to grasp and control, and to justify our ambitions for the future? Have we never used prayer ourselves to try and plead for our own advantage, to turn stones into pieces of bread, to provide the miracle or proof, in some way to influence God and to control our destiny? And isn't this same type of religion, taken to its extreme, the religion which seeks to justify its own righteousness, and defeat the enemies of nation, faith, tribe or mind-set? In the desert Jesus clearly rejects the temptation of worldly or supernatural power. And yet, is it not human to long for miraculous intervention? And did not Christ encourage us to ask for things in his name? But what happens when there seems to be no supernatural intervention and our prayers are in vain?

I had a priest friend in Melanesia called Father Dixon Nakisi, who was diagnosed with advanced cancer of the bone. Many of us prayed for him. He asked us to come and lay hands on him, to pour holy oil on his swollen leg, to pray for him each day in church, but his sickness only grew worse. His wife was pregnant. He was a father of two young children. He was a good and holy man, who had dedicated his life to serving God, but was dying, aged only 28 years old. God seemed very unfair. Shortly before his death, I went to visit him. In our conversation I asked him gently about God and all the prayers that had been offered. "Do you feel God has helped you during this time?" I feared his answer, and yet it astonished me. "Oh yes, Christ is what I do have now. Christ is everything to me now, and to my family..."

From 2000 to 2003, was a time of war and conflict in the Solomon Islands, which I have written about in my book to be published today, *In Search of the Lost*. Indeed, in much of the conflict it did seem very much that we were lost. There were times of brutality and darkness, like a nightmare which you hoped you would wake from, and find it was not true. At times during the bloodshed it felt that our prayers were not being answered, but the suffering was escalating. And yet, and yet, I too would echo the words of Father Dixon Nakisi: Christ was everything to us at that time, everything we had, everything we believed in, everything that we wanted to belong to which would give us hope. And as I step back from that time of struggle, I realise it was also a time when I have never experienced so intensely the presence of Christ – the 'King who came down', for the prayers from around the world were upholding us.

Right in the thick of things, while many of our Community were still being held hostage, and were still traumatised by the violence of all they had witnessed, I remember watching a DVD on a television powered by a village generator, hoping for an escape from my anxieties. I made this entry in my diary: 'The DVD I watched tonight is peopled by heroes who fight evil with every weapon and technique imaginable, and defeat their enemies single-handedly and against all the odds. Mel Gibson is the star of one, who is defending his men so courageously and killing the Vietnamese with conscience-free abandon. It seems a travesty of reality, for if there is glory in violent conflict, it is the reverse of most fictional presentations, fictional fearlessness. And our heroes look very different. The reality of violence is about

mess and confusion and trying somehow to get to the other side of the flood, and regain the bank. It is about how to keep the heads of those you love above water without drowning yourself. The reality is about victims you know and care about, people who are human like you. It feels as if you have been stripped of your defences, and left exposed and in pain. And strangely the courage is here, in frightening vulnerability, like a hostage held in the lens of a terrorist video, pleading for his life. And the glory is here, in this exposed humanity. Here is where our hearts belong, for we know we belong to those who we love and not to the oppressor. And it is here that we choose to love, and our love must be greater than all our fear. How strange it is that when we are most abandoned, we find our God waiting for us just beyond our fear’.

In our Gospel today, Christ stands before Pilate, both completely vulnerable and at the same time completely King. There is no spin, no saving face, no miraculous divine intervention, no US cavalry, no military power about to save him. And yet the very one who is the condemned prisoner is the very one who is most free. Jesus is on trial and yet reverses the trial, for those who condemn him become the prisoners of the evil they do. There is a stillness, a peace, in Christ which draws us to him. Even in the midst of all of this, we long to be on his side. When we see truth, we recognise it. There is a transparency in which we realise there is no need for deceit or even fear, and we are drawn to that truth: it is quite simply a love for God and a love for humanity which cannot be taken away. And in the midst of all the evil, which is very real, and all the mockery of this trial, it is Christ alone who holds our gaze, and who opens up all possibilities of life. And this call is the strongest call of our lives. It is a call to truth, not a grabbing of power for oneself, but an offering of love. Neither does it involve a passive acquiescence to suffering and injustice. It is in fact the only true way to transformation. Pilate glimpses this, but is caught in the politics of expediency. This then is our blessing: even in the midst of struggle, our King calls us to become sons and daughters of a new kingdom, a New Testament. It is not the old theology of personal gain and selfish power; it is not self-seeking, it is God-seeking. And yet in finding God, we find ourselves. In seeming vulnerability and powerlessness we find a truth great enough to transform the world. Christ the King did not change the world with weapons of political power: war, atrocity, invasion, missiles, suicide bombs or helicopter gunships – he transformed the world with a self-offering love and forgiveness, and we who walk in his footsteps are called into the same paschal mystery, and become one with the heroes of our Church: fishermen, tax collectors, sinners, ordinary men and women whose lives were transformed by Christ and who in offering their lives transformed the life of others.

Towards the end of my book I write these words:

What have I learnt?
I have learnt that God is real
He spans the void
His cross from top to bottom
From side to side
From God to flesh
From flesh to flesh in real human love
He is there
Our King is among us
And so we dare to love
Dare to follow
Risking all
A vulnerable life
For the vulnerable life-giver
But there is a greater beauty
A gentle strength
A tender discipline

A touched hope
An intimate unity
A transparent truth
A bold humility
A courageous love
And it is that which has been revealed
There is in truth no other way
Unless we want to betray our inner nature
Our Christ nature

It is that which Christ the King shows us
His truth radiant and good
From inside out
Out to all the world
That love is for us and others
Amen.