

# **Sunday 23 November 2008: Last Sunday before Advent, The Feast of Christ the King**

## **Christ the King**

**Readings: Ephesians 1.15-23; Matthew 25.31-46**

Recently John McCain was asked how he has been sleeping since losing the Presidential election., “I’m fine”, he said. “I sleep like a baby: sleep for two hours, wake up, cry, sleep for two hours, wake up, cry”!

In October, I was in the US for election fever. Then people were polarised about the way they saw the candidates and the choices that faced America. Now it’s hard to escape the excitement and optimism that comes with President elect Obama. With him, it feels we are entering a new era at the same time as, perhaps partly because, the depth of the economic crisis is testing America’s leadership and capitalism’s ability to adapt and survive and serve the good of all.

We know that ‘crisis’ is a Greek word for both a judgement and an opportunity, but the Chief Rabbi recently reminded us that in Hebrew the word for ‘crisis’ also translates as ‘a birthing stool’. What we are going through is a painful process that has the potential to give new life. What is needed to be brought to birth is both economic order and greater justice for a world in which 1 billion people live on less than \$1 a day. Maybe the real significance of the otherwise relatively trivial crisis triggered by Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand at the BBC is that we’ve had enough of the selfish vulgarity which has gone hand in hand with unparalleled levels of personal greed for the last 25 years or so.

Political, social and economic circumstances have always played an important part in the ways they shape religious beliefs and theology. Today, the last Sunday before Advent, is the Feast of Christ the King, an assertion made in faith and hope that Christ is Lord of all. Religious kingship as applied to Jesus is, and always has been, controversial.

The Bible tells of the ways in which God’s people were governed in the time of leaders like Moses and Joshua. They gave way to an era of the Judges of Israel. Very, very reluctantly did God give in to the petitions that Israel should be like other nations and have a King (1 Sam 8). As predicted, it was not wholly successful but David is remembered as the ideal king whom the longed-for messiah would be like. So it was natural for Christians to think of Jesus the messiah as King ‘in fulfilment of the scriptures’ but the tradition needed careful qualification. Born in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem; of David’s line, but not exercising military might; the Master who washed his disciples’ feet, whose law was love and who taught that we will meet him in the poor, the sick, the prisoner and the stranger. The humility of the servant king, marks out what is distinctive about Christ, the person in whom we meet God face to face, who invites a response from us rather than forces one.

We live in a part of the world that is now rightly sceptical about theocratic states where religious and political leaders are one and have a hotline to God. We are also weary of political leaders claiming too much for themselves. ‘Messiah Obama’ would never do. In these contexts, images of Christ the King aren’t adequate without subversive qualification.

One of the stories I love about this church is that King Henry VIII made St Martin's a parish church so that plague victims would no longer be brought past his front door in the Palace of Whitehall for burial at St Margaret's Westminster. They would be taken away to the church in the fields. So we became 'The Royal Parish Church' because we buried the plague victims, and that has left its mark on us. It was really interesting when we went on tour during the period of closure for building work last year, that none of the churches we went to had the press and flow of difficult and disturbing people we experience here.

Whilst we see the work of The Connection at St Martin's with homeless people as a major charitable commitment, what those people bring to us is the earthing of a church pitched 'Halfway 'twixt heaven and Charing Cross'. Our patron St Martin is remembered for an astonishing act of charity in which he cut his cloak in half for a beggar, but the greater blessing was given to Martin by the beggar who returned to him in a dream as Christ. It's a part of our Christian spiritual discipline to keep ourselves open to the possibility we will have a similar encounter. Homeless people in this St Martin's community are part of God's gift to us.

Yesterday there was a memorial service for a South African bishop who died in September aged not quite 60. David Beetge was a good man, a dear friend to many at St Martin's and a great bishop in the Anglican Communion. What was striking about him in the reflections at yesterday's service was his ordinariness, and I don't mean that pejoratively. There was nothing flashy about him. What set him apart was the single-mindedness of his service of Jesus Christ. The key to him was his discipline in personal prayer. It was a privilege to pray with him in the cold air of a winter's morning on the East Rand in his chapel created at one end of what had been a garage. He was courageous in the face of Apartheid and a determined servant of his Diocese which has been ravaged by AIDS. He combined the prayerful hopeful vision of God in Christ with a practical loving commitment to the people he served.

"I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers", wrote St Paul in the letter to the Ephesians read as today's Epistle. "I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you."

That's a high hope for Lochlan McAlpine at his baptism this morning. It is the hope of all of us who seek to follow in the way of Jesus at this festival of Christ the King before we turn again in the coming week to Advent Sunday not just to begin again but circling deeper in our relationship with God who comes among us in Jesus Christ as both king and stranger.