



Revd Ro's Reflection on
Sunday next before Advent
Christ the King
Year C

Colossians 1.11-20

Luke 23.33-43

This Sunday is Christ the King Sunday and it ends the Kingdom Season. Next week is the first Sunday in Advent when we look forward to the coming of King Jesus at his incarnation but also, as we have seen over the last few weeks, to his second coming in God's newly restored creation. The readings of course reflect this. Our readings have been leading up to this point, Jesus' last week in Jerusalem; now he stands before Pilate.

The cross is at the centre of the Christian faith. At first the early Christian symbol was the sign of the fish because its initial letters spelled out, Jesus Christ God's Son our Saviour. Later the cross symbolised our faith. It doesn't matter whether the cross is made from the most precious metal and is encrusted with jewels or if it is two charred pieces of wood lashed together as with the cross fashioned from the ruins of Coventry Cathedral. The focus is the cross. I love carved wooden crosses; I loved the crucifix which once stood across the roof beams in Comberford Church. Almost life sized, Jesus on the cross symbolically supporting the roof of the church with Mary on one side and St. John on the other. I would sit silently in church and simply meditate on this. The other is the smaller carved crucifix on the wall at Spital Chapel. The cross is not the focus, any more than an icon is but it should act as a channel which enables us to become nearer to God.

Christ the King Sunday has always been one of my favourite Sundays in the calendar. The crucifixion is chosen for the gospel reading because the cross, an instrument of disgrace, torture and death was transformed by Christ into a throne. I will pause here for a moment to say that it is worth reading the account of the crucifixion in more than one gospel. There are added details if you look at Luke and John for example.

Let us go back a bit. Jesus has been betrayed by his follower and friend Judas. The others ran away, only Peter followed at a distance. When faced with recognition, possible arrest and a similar fate

Peter's resolve failed and he denied Jesus. Now alone, Jesus is taken before the High Priest Caiaphas, Annas had been High Priest and was probably still the power behind the throne. We have seen the jealousy, fear and spite of the powerful sects the Pharisees and Sadducees and co, all of whom are out to trap him. Jesus is a threat to the power base of all the Jewish leaders. He was a threat to Herod, the puppet King, he was a threat to the Temple hierarchy. It was only a matter of time before he was arrested, under cover of dark of course because they feared the people. Actually this arrest is the responsibility of all who turned away from him, all those whose hosannas were to turn to cries for his blood. The Jewish leaders wanted Jesus executed but only the Roman Governor could do that.

It is interesting to pause at this point to look at Pontius Pilate, just who was this man? If you asked most people the answer would be, 'The man who crucified Jesus,' but what do we know about him? Actually much of it is shrouded in mystery and legend. He may have been born in Scotland; his career was as either a soldier or politician. He was appointed governor in AD 32. He might be a governor but the province to which he was sent was a backwater of the Empire. It was not an easy place to be though, the Jews could be a troublesome lot and he knew it. Pilate's aim was to keep peace, to keep control at any price. He was an arrogant bully, cruel and heartless when he thought the occasion required it. He seemed to take delight in affronting the Jews. Actually expediency was the name of the game, if it suited the situation; if it suited him he would do it. That has little to do with justice and morality. By AD 37 we hear no more of Pilate.

Anyone who posed any kind of threat, who represented any sniff of rebellion, was to be squashed – no mercy. Pilate is coming at this from his perspective. So obviously his first question to Jesus is about power, politics and signs of rebellion.

^{23.1} 'Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus before Pilate. ² They began to accuse him, saying, 'We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.' ³ Then Pilate asked him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' He answered, 'You say so.' ⁴ Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no basis for an accusation against this man.'

Knowing what we do about Pilate it is amazing, given the clamour and accusations, that he finds no evidence to condemn him. There is something happening in this confrontation. Jesus standing quietly before him but full of nobility and the authority that people recognise instantly affects him. This man is no threat to the Empire. Pilate instantly knows the accusation is unfounded. But the crowd are dangerous. Pilate's answer is expediency when faced with a difficult situation. Ah well he comes from Galilee, right let Herod deal with it.

^{23.8} 'When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time, because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. ⁹ He questioned him at some length, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹ Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate.'

Jesus when faced by Herod simply looks at him, no word, and no sign. It's a hugely difficult thing to do but Jesus has immense stature. He is every inch a king even belittled and dressed in the purple robe.

¹³ 'Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, ¹⁴ and said to them, 'You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your

presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. ¹⁵Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death.'

That should have been it. But what happens next is what so often happens, the loudest voices, the most forceful people prevail. It is usually with a threat behind it. 'If you don't, we will'. These are some of the saddest words,

²³ 'But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed.'

It is because Pilate fears a riot that he gives in and Jesus is the scapegoat. How many times throughout history do people simply give in because they fear the consequences if they stand up for what is right? How easy is it to keep quiet for 'peace's sake' or not to want to get involved? So Jesus is taken to Calvary. He knew exactly what was to happen, this is his destiny. Only thus can he beat down the powers of evil through love. Only thus can he carry the weight of sin and win salvation for us. Only thus can death finally be defeated when he rises triumphant on Easter morning. Jesus is the King who gives a new meaning to kingship. He is the servant king, 'Whoever would be great among you must be the humble servant of all.' His words 'Greater love has no one than this that they lay down their life for their friends,' were to come true very soon. Jesus said, 'For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.' Jesus is bringing the truth of God, the kingdom of God is close to humanity, Jesus is their king, Jesus is truth, and he holds the words of life. Calvary is his throne and here is fought a cosmic battle. Sin and evil is defeated by love and salvation is won for humanity. Jesus is bringing in God's new creation and at the perfection of this order he will come again to rule in triumph. Here on the cross we see very human details. Here Jesus is still teaching us.

³³ 'When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁴Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.'

Even as the nails are being driven home Jesus prays for forgiveness. These men, soldiers doing an everyday job and brutalised by their trade, do not realise the enormity of their crime, nailing God incarnate to a tree. Jesus is the epitome of love and forgiveness. He does not condone evil, he condemns it and stands up against it but he forgives in love. There are small lines here easily overlooked but they are of vital significance,

'And they cast lots to divide his clothing. '

Psalm 22 is by tradition read at the end of the Maundy Thursday service. It contains many echoes of the crucifixion.

16 'For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.

My hands and feet have shrivelled;

17 I can count all my bones.

They stare and gloat over me;

18 they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.'

Luke's readers would have seen this as a fulfilment of these words.

³⁵ 'And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, 'He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!' ³⁶The soldiers also mocked him,

coming up and offering him sour wine,³⁷ and saying, 'If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!'

³⁸ There was also an inscription over him, 'This is the King of the Jews.'

The Jewish leaders see the execution as a triumph. This is the end of the so-called Messiah, they have destroyed their enemy. How wrong can you be? Jesus is the suffering servant who dies for the people. He is the true Messiah who will rescue not just those Jews who turn to him but humanity. He will rise again on the third day and the world will be transformed. When Pilate nails that mocking proclamation on the cross he cannot see the irony of it. Jesus is not only the king of the Jews he is King of creation. Jesus came into the world to save the world not condemn it.

Even now in his agony Jesus turns to the repentant thief.

³⁹ 'One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!'⁴⁰ But the other rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?'⁴¹ And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.'⁴² Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'⁴³ He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

This human plea does not go unnoticed. Jesus is part of the Godhead. God sees everyone and loves everyone. We are all equal in God's eyes and it is never too late to turn to him. Jesus will never turn his back on any one of us.

Jesus is King, Calvary is his throne and here is fought a cosmic battle. Sin and evil is defeated by love and salvation is won for humanity. Jesus is bringing in God's new creation and at the perfection of this order he will come again to rule in triumph. No wonder this reading is always set for Christ the King Sunday!

Our epistle reading is from Paul's letter to the Colossians. What a beautiful greeting opens it.

² 'To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters Christ in Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. ³ In our prayers for you we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.'

So may it be said of us and all of us! What a pattern they set to the Christian. Paul highlights two things, their love of Christ and their love for each other. If you want a recipe for a sound Christian community, that is it.

⁶ 'Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God.'

Paul talks in terms of 'bearing fruit,' just as in the 'fruits of the Spirit'. The bearing of fruit is positive, creative and life giving just as Jesus intended. Only a community founded on Christ, love and concern for one another can bear fruit like this. All around the area of Paul and his followers' mission, the word is flourishing in the Christian churches they have planted. It will go on spreading until the entire world has heard of Jesus Christ our Saviour. As it has been growing in the world so it has in Colossae and Paul is delighted at the report he has received from Epaphras. This is certainly a Spirit filled community.

¹¹ 'May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.'

Persecution was a real danger, Paul knows that only too well; he is writing this letter from prison. Paul prays that they will be strong in the faith that they have turned to, whatever may come their way. They will not be standing in their own strength because in our own strength humanity can do little. No, they are strengthened by the Holy Spirit of God and so can achieve much and withstand much. God's 'glorious power' is within them. They have received the promises of God in baptism. They are brothers and sisters with Christ and they are inheritors of salvation and eternal life. This is why they must worship God with joy and give thanks to him in worship and prayer. Paul sums up Christ's victory in a few words,

¹³ 'He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.'

They like all who truly turn to Christ and live according to his teachings, are no longer ensnared by evil but are freed. Their sins have been forgiven and they are redeemed. They are all children of God and equal in his sight. Whoever they are male or female, slave or free, they are loved by him and must reflect that love in their church community and in the world. This is true of every Christian. We have looked at the Crucifixion, seen Pilate's mocking words, 'Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews,' indeed he is, but he is so much more. He is king of creation. This passage from Colossians is unique; identical material to this does not appear anywhere else in the bible. However, we can compare it to Philippians 2.6-11, and John 1.1-14, it is a Christological hymn. This passage shows us just how far Christology has come in a few years. These readings are my favourite passages from the gospels. This passage is awesome. As with John 1 it spells out quite clearly the nature of Jesus Christ as human and divine, pre-existent with God and of God. It is almost impossible to do this passage justice, like a fine poem or a sublime piece of music we just want to read and marvel. Nevertheless I will do my best.

The opening makes Christ's status as, 'image of the invisible God' absolutely clear and that Jesus Christ is co-existent with God and of God. 'Firstborn of all creation' does not mean he was brought into being by God, the first of created beings. What this opening states is that, 'In him all things in heaven and earth were created.'

¹⁵ 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶ for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.'

The statement sets out the fact that Christ was in the beginning with God bringing all into being. He is King of all that is and all rulers and powers are nothing in comparison. All owe their being to him. This passage sets out the supremacy of Christ. The opening of John 1 is almost identical in its statement that Christ is part of the Godhead and is co-creator.

¹ 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.'

Both state that Christ, the second person of the trinity, was 'before all things.' And all things were created by him. And Colossians goes on,

¹⁸ 'He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.'

This refers to Jesus, the incarnate God. It is Christ who is not only head of the church but of every created thing. The church is not any building; the church is its members, every single one. Each

member of the church is important; each member of the body is interdependent upon each other. That is true harmony. This is further explored by Paul in Corinthians 12. Paul makes it quite clear; there is only one head of the church that is Jesus Christ. There must be no room for status, no room for arrogance among Christians and no 'Lording it over one another.'

The focus turns to the resurrection referring to Christ as 'the first born from the dead.' Look how the words, 'so that he might come to have first place in everything' compare with the words from Philippians 2.

9 'Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.'

Jesus Christ died for us on Calvary and rose for us. He bore our sins for us. This is stressed in these lines because it is absolutely central to our faith. God came to us in Jesus, we ourselves were helpless. It is through the grace of God freely given in love that Christ laid down his life for us and won salvation for us once and for all. At the resurrection all was changed forever. Jesus Christ is the King of all that is and was and is to be. Christ ushers in God's newly created order.

¹⁹ 'For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.'

The cross and Jesus' triumph there is central, he restores our relationship with God by his blood shed at Calvary. St. John sums this up when he writes,

¹² 'But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.'

Christ's divinity is shown in the resurrection. No resurrection, then no foundation for faith. Paul makes that clear in Corinthians 15.17

¹⁷ 'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. ²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.'

It can seem as though these passages are somehow theological and therefore distant from us. They are anything but distant. They are the whole crux of Christian belief. This is the point that Paul is making in the passage to the Colossians. This must be the foundation of their faith as it is with ours. Christ is King and Lord of all, we are his body here on earth, the church. That is us, every one of us who call ourselves Christian. We do not simply act for ourselves and for what we want. Whenever we act we should ask, just what would Jesus want of us in this situation? Further to that, does my action really show that I am a member of the body of Christ?

This passage of high Christology makes Paul's teaching to the Colossians clear. He is laying down the fundamentals of Christian faith to them, the fundamentals of the faith we follow. This is who Jesus

Christ is; this is the God whom we confess. We confess it every time we say the creed, our statement of belief. It is the foundation of the baptismal promises of new Christians.

Both The opening of John's gospel and this passage, examine the nature of the Christ who rules as the second person of the trinity but who walks alongside us in our suffering and our joy, immanent, God with us. The Colossian Christians have turned to Christ as saviour and God. The passage above has summed up the nature of Jesus Christ, the face of God humanity has seen. If you want to know the nature of God, says Paul, then look at Jesus Christ. The disciple Philip says, 'Show us the Father.' Jesus answers, 'I am in the Father and the Father in me.' That is the totality of it. As the beautiful communion prayer expresses it, when humanity was 'still far off, you met us in your Son and brought us home.'

'Lord of infinity, stooping so tenderly, lifts our humanity to the heights of his throne.' Graham Kendrick

