

Christ the King 2018 (Choral Evensong)

Daniel 5; John 6: 1 – 15

Believe it or not, Michael Foot often quoted Enoch Powell. In his published reviews of political memoirs – and I’m nerdy enough to have three volumes of them collected in book form – Foot often quotes Powell as saying “All political lives end in failure.” In actual fact that is a truncated version of how Powell opens the epilogue to his life of Joseph Chamberlain – and I’m nerdy enough to have read that as well. What Powell says is “All political lives, unless they are cut off in midstream by some happy juncture, end in failure, because that is the nature of politics and of human affairs.”

Of course it’s also the nature of politics and of human affairs that, when someone falls from grace through a catastrophic error of judgement, that overshadows everything else they’ve ever done. And such is the racist offensiveness of Powell’s Rivers of Blood speech

that I really don’t want to be associated with him. But let it be said, as Michael Foot had the repeated generosity to recognise, that Powell’s observation that political lives end in failure “because that is the nature of politics and of human affairs” is absolutely right. And of course for us this evening, as we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King, it is not just an observation: it is a matter of theological truth. So far as the nature of politics and of human affairs is concerned, the writing is on the wall.

In that delicious, cartoon-like passage we had from Daniel 5 this evening, the writing was quite literally on the wall. Fingers of a human hand appeared and began writing on the plaster. I’m sure there’s an episode of Scooby Doo when something similar happens – and, but for those pesky kids they’d have gotten away with it – and when they saw it Scooby Doo’s and Shaggy’s knees knocked together in good old cartoon honoured fashion, precisely as King Belshazzar’s do in Daniel 5: “[The King’s] limbs gave

way and his knees knocked together” we read! Because it’s cartoon-like, the offence which causes the writing on the wall, is extra vivid as well: Belshazzar has desecrated the sacred vessels of the temple in Jerusalem by drinking out of them in a drunken orgy. But the writing is always on the wall for human power, whether it’s marked by excessive hubris or not. The contrast between Daniel 5 and John 6 is the contrast between human regimes in general and the Kingdom which Jesus establishes. Human regimes come to an end. Jesus’ Kingdom is everlasting; it is inexhaustible.

In order to see that contrast clearly, we’ve got to understand that the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes is not a trick that Jesus does to impress us with. On Friday evening James & Henry Ireland and I were at an Air Cadets’ awards evening. There was a magician who was so bad, he was almost good; and he did a multiplication trick. He did it with a hanky chief. He got a normal hanky; he put it in his mouth; and then when he pulled it out it kept on and

on, coming out in different colours. And we gave him a round of applause and remarked how clever he was. But when Jesus was up the mountain side he didn’t do a similar sort of thing, only with loaves and fishes instead of a hanky, so that the crowd would give him a round of applause and say how clever he was. What the story in John 6 does is demonstrate that the nourishment Jesus gives is inexhaustible, both in terms of how far it will go and how long it will last. The writing’s never on the wall for the Kingdom of Heaven.

No matter how far it’s spread, the nourishment Jesus gives never runs out. The 12 basket loads of left overs in the story is, of course, a symbol for the 12 tribes of Israel and an allusion to the hoary chestnut of whether Christianity is for the gentiles or just for Jews. The message is that when even the whole people, the gentiles, have received Jesus, there’s still enough there for the 12 tribes of Israel. And the message is that that is food for eternal life.

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

So far, so good, but we've got to work out what to do with these pious thoughts when we leave church tonight, get up tomorrow morning and resume our Monday to Saturday lives. At one level, of course, they give us a pattern for living: avoid hubris. We're all tempted to hubris. We might not be tempted to take the chalice from the Priory into the Bull & Sun to be filled up with Timothy Taylor's Landlord, but we're all tempted to overreach ourselves one way or another. And when we're tempted we should think of Jesus refusing to receive the adulation of the crowds and taking himself off for some solitude and contemplation instead.

But our faith is more than a self-improvement instruction manual. It's about a new dimension of living. This multiplication miracle is deliberately couched in terms that make us think of Holy Communion: Jesus *took* the loaves, *gave thanks* and *distributed* it to them. The book of Common Prayer describes taking Communion as being incorporated

into the mystical body of Jesus Christ. There is a mystical dimension to being a Christian. Because we are people who receive Communion eternity intersects with our mundane lives and gives them a new significance. Enoch Powell said all lives end in failure unless they are interrupted "by some happy juncture." The moment of receiving Communion is the happy juncture which promises our lives can never end in failure.

Amen.