

Christ the King 2020 (22.11.2020)

**Ezekiel 34: 11 – 16, 20 – 24; Matthew 25: 31 –
end**

Today we celebrate the Festival of Christ the King, the climax and culmination of the Church's year. Now that's a very churchy sentence, so perhaps before we go any further, it deserves some unpacking. If you've been coming to church for years and years, this might be a bit like teaching your grandmother to suck eggs, but it never harms to be reminded of basics; and if you've not heard this before, you've got to hear for the first time somewhere.

The Church's year is not the same as the calendar year. It does not run from January 1st to December 31st. It runs from the beginning of Advent, four Sundays before Christmas, ie. next Sunday, and runs through to the Festival of Christ the King. So this is the last Sunday of the year and next Sunday is the first Sunday of the year.

During the course of the Church's year, the story of how we meet God through Jesus unfolds. During Advent we wait for him and prepare for him to be born. We then celebrate his birth; we reflect on what is revealed about the nature of God that he's prepared to come and be born among us; we learn from his earthly ministry about what he taught and how he healed and see the pattern for living that he set us; we accompany him as he walks headlong into political confrontation, betrayal and arrest. And we sit at the foot of his cross as he dies for us. We celebrate his resurrection, the new life that it gives; we watch with adoration and wonder as he ascends into heaven; we wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit and celebrate the story of it arriving at Pentecost; and then we spend an age working out what it means for us to live as disciples of the a God who is the Father who made us, the Son who gives us a new life and a renewed dignity, and the Holy Spirit who empowers us to live as

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resident aliens¹ on this earth because we are citizens of the kingdom over which Christ is King. And we've come full circle.

There is a danger when we celebrate the assertion that Christ is King that we become triumphalistic; that we will become smug; and that we will become judgmental about people who are not part of our holy gang. That danger is averted by the emphasis in our Bible readings today, both in the teaching of Jesus himself and in the prophesy of Ezekiel which foreshadows it, that the majesty of Jesus completely subverts any preconceived notions we might have about majesty. The majesty of Jesus is shown in self-denying service of others, not through ruling it over others.

So in Ezekiel, there is talk of seeking the lost, bringing back the stray, binding up the injured and

¹ An allusion to the work of Stanley Hauerwas generally, but especially Hauerwas, S & Willimon, W H [1989] Resident Aliens, Abingdon Press Nashville

strengthening the weak. There is also criticism of pushing with the flank and shoulder and butting the weak out of the way. To bring that bang up to date to speak to us this week, we may well paraphrase it to say God will not tolerate bullying or bullies being condoned². In Matthew chapter 25 we're told that citizens of the Christ's Kingdom feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, cloth the naked, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned.

We rejoice that this week in Bridlington we have seen a working example of those values being out into practice. The Church of England churches in Bridlington and surrounding area have a house in which we home three people who are homeless or are vulnerable to being homeless. Ian Burbidge, who worships at the Priory works for two days a week as the Housing Support Officer of the project, managing

² 48 hours before this sermon was delivered a report had been published finding that the Home Secretary had bullied Civil Servants. The Prime Minister had rejected the findings, given the Home Secretary his full backing; and the author of the report, the Prime Minister's Advisor on Ministerial Conduct, had resigned as a result.

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the house, giving the occupants pastoral support and doing resettlement work with them to assist them in due course graduated into fully independent living. What we're particularly rejoicing about this week is that we have announced the appointment of a second Housing Support Officer, Michael Matravers who worships at Christ Church, to work with people in a second house which we hope to buy in the next few months.

What I stressed when I was chairing meetings about setting up this project, which was begun just over a year ago, is that we shouldn't go into it with any romanticised notions, that poor homeless people would tug their forelocks in gratitude for the munificence of Christians. We don't want people to be grateful; we want them to have dignity and self-respect. There's a wonderful passage in Oscar Wilde's "The Soul of Man under Socialism":

“[T]he best among the poor are never grateful. They are ungrateful, discontented, disobedient

and rebellious. They are quite right to be so. Charity they feel to be a ridiculously inadequate mode of partial restitution, or a sentimental dole, usually accompanied by some impertinent attempt on the part of the sentimentalist to tyrannise over their private lives. Why should they be grateful for the crumbs that fall from the rich man's table?”

We run Hope Housing Bridlington, not to make ourselves feel good or in the hope of making people conform to our own image. We do it expecting damage, abuse and rejection. We do it because we believe we are doing to for Jesus. We do it because we hope we're enacting the Kingdom of Heaven. We do it because Christ is King.

Amen.