

Dorset South & West Circuit - Written Service for Sunday 22 November – 'Christ the King' - by Revd David Cuckson

Introduction

One of the readings set in the Lectionary for today is taken from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. It is a letter written in general terms, rather than concentrating on particular issues in the church addressed, and it may well have been sent to more than one Christian community. But the key thing is that this is part of Paul's way of keeping in touch, both with those he has nurtured in the faith and those whom he has never met. So writing and reading the letter is a means of overcoming a present separation – something that many of us are experiencing in these days of pandemic. Paul's prayer in this passage is one that I invite everyone to make his or her own – a prayer to the church community with which many of us have only limited contact just now, and a prayer that takes us into the heart of our faith as Christians.

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. 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, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (*Ephesians 1:15-23 NRSVA*)

HYMN **Singing the Faith 319** (Michael Seward)

Christ triumphant, ever
reigning,
Saviour, Master, King!
Lord of heaven, our lives
sustaining,
hear us as we sing:
*Yours the glory and
the crown,
the high renown,
the eternal name!*

Word incarnate, truth
revealing,
Son of Man on earth!
Power and majesty
concealing
by your humble birth:

Suffering servant, scorned,
ill-treated,
victim crucified!
Death is through the cross
defeated,
sinners justified:

Priestly king, enthroned for
ever
high in heaven above!
Sin and death and hell shall
never
stifle hymns of love:

So, our hearts and voices
raising
through the ages long,
ceaselessly upon you
gazing,
this shall be our song:

*Yours the glory and
the crown,
the high renown,
the eternal name!*

Prayer

Wise and Holy One, you are beyond our imagination, beyond our understanding, beyond our humanity; and because you are beyond us we turn to you for sanctuary, we come to you for protection.

Wise and Holy One, you are not completely beyond our imagination, because Jesus Christ shows us what you are like; you are not completely beyond our understanding because Jesus Christ teaches us the way; you are not completely beyond our humanity because Jesus Christ is one of us. And because you are beside us we can walk alongside you as a companion, we can speak honestly with you as a friend, we can keep silence with you as a lover.

Wise and Holy One, not completely beyond us, not only beside us but deep within our being. Spirit of God, when we feel confused, help us to make sense of life and offer it to others; when we fail to love you, help us to know your forgiveness and share it with others; encourage us to leave what is past and travel on, with you and all your people, into your glorious future. Amen.

And now, as we turn our thoughts to the Gospel reading for today, a prayer for grace:

O Lord, heavenly Father, in whom is the fullness of grace and wisdom, enlighten our minds by your Holy Spirit, and give us grace to receive your Word with reverence and humility, without which no one can understand your truth. For Christ's sake. Amen.

Matthew 25:31-46 (NRSVA)

‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

Sermon



When we visited the Vatican in Rome a few years ago, as part of a guided tour, we started with the Vatican Museum and spent time looking at the marvellous works of art there. But the visit ended

with a climax of entering the Sistine Chapel to see Michelangelo's wonderful frescoes. You are ready to look up at the ceiling because you know that there you can find that marvellous image of the Creation of Man, so often reproduced, but in fact your eye is first caught by the enormous representation of the Last Judgment, of which the illustration above is just a small part. It is a common theme wherever there are wall paintings or mosaics, but Michelangelo's portrayal of Christ is, I think, especially striking. This is very much Christ the King, dominating the scene, with his upraised arm, a figure wielding absolute power. And this is what you see most of all as you face the altar.

But I am not sure that this painting, great work of art as it is, really conveys the true character of Christ, even Christ in glory, Christ in judgment. I think my major concern is that it reflects too much the idea of the absolute ruler who imposes what are at times quite arbitrary laws and requirements on his people, a concept that would have been familiar to Michelangelo and has been experienced throughout, I suppose, in all ages and in all different parts of the world. Judgment is imposed without humanity. If the letter of the law is broken then condemnation follows. You even see this in our own history, which we are only now coming to look back at with a more critical eye. Think, for example, of some of the poor, destitute folk who were hauled up before the justices in the Shire Hall courthouse, now a museum that can tell some of their stories – folk who are arrested and put in the cells, then brought up from the darkness into the light of a courtroom where the whole atmosphere was designed to intimidate the accused, charged in terms that they could not fully comprehend, often with no evidence put forward in support of the charge and with no-one to advise them or to speak on their behalf, and then condemned to transportation or even death.

But in our reading from Matthew's Gospel we are a world away from that. We are not confronted here by the letter of the law, or by infringements of technical requirements. What matters before Christ is the kind of people we are, and especially how we relate to other people in our lives. Are we aware of other people's needs and desires? Do we even see those folk we encounter as real people? And do we respond to them, to their needs and desires with love? Do we care about them? Do we offer help when we can, when it is needed?

Some people seem to manage not to regard some people as fully human, either because they regard such folk with contempt or because they are blinded by prejudice. Think of how the Nazi regime was able to categorise Jews, Gypsies and disabled people as outside normal society, fit only for imprisonment and slaughter or as the subjects for bizarre medical experiments. Yes, that was an extreme example but, then again, it is only comparatively recently that we have come to recognise the extent to which the British Empire grew rich and came to depend on the exploitation of subject people, both conquered inhabitants and traded slaves. Local thriving cultures were dramatically overturned and the inhabitants forced instead to grow crops for the British market or work mines to supply raw materials for British industry. Slave families were treated like living machines and children of slaves were regarded simply as assets to be worked or sold into slavery elsewhere. And when the slave trade was formally ended by Britain, still slavery continued in the British Empire until slave owners were compensated generously in return for emancipation; then the newly freed slaves had the option between working for their former masters for a pittance or starving without access to land of their own. It is this more subtle form of exploitation that we are now coming to appreciate. 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'

We are asked to mark this as Women against Violence Sunday, and it seems to me that, in the light of the underlying theme of our Gospel reading, a major issue in the ill treatment of women is this failure to regard them fully as individuals deserving respect and consideration. Historically in our country and still in some parts of the world women are regarded largely as property. Decisions are taken by others as to who should be their partner. In marriage the wife's position is totally subservient to that of her husband. And this creates a climate in the home where the husband feels able to take advantage of his wife, even to the point of physically taking out his frustrations on her. And outside marriage women are seen by some as sexual objects, and what may start off as light-

hearted banter or flirting can turn nasty and even violent if the woman does not respond as the man expects and demands.

It is so easy to slip into attitudes that belong to the 'goats' rather than the 'sheep', and our Gospel reading reminds us of the need to bring ourselves up short from time to time to reassert what we know should be our priorities. Last year the Chilean Methodist Church put together some material as part of a campaign supporting women suffering from domestic abuse. It included the following poem, 'There are hands', which, I think, sums up the message I have tried to get across:-

There are soft and warm hands.
There are hands worn away by work.
There are hands with thousands of little wrinkles
And little hands that want to play.

There are hands which sow and which harvest.
There are hands which teach how to walk.
There are strong hands that protect me
And hands open and ready to play.

But there are other hands which only do harm,
That dirty the earth, the sky and the sea.
There are ugly and selfish hands,
There are hands which make the world cry.

Raise your hands, all those who want
A new way of living together.
Let those bad hands be isolated
And let only the good ones prosper.

The hand that heals and the tired hand,
The mischievous hand and the wrinkled hand,
The trembling hand and the hand that brings comfort,
The hand that kneads and the hand that prays,

The hand that seeks justice and truth,
Your hand, my hand ... hand in hand for peace.

Though at the present time many of us cannot physically put hand in hand, we can still do so through the medium of prayer.

Prayer

As we think of Christ the King, we pray for Christ's justice to be seen and experienced in every part of the world and in every part of the world's life.

We think of some of the countries of the world where there are conflicts that seem so long-standing and complex that we cannot imagine resolution; and we pray for wisdom and reconciliation

We think of communities where the gaps between privilege and powerlessness seem to grow ever wider; and we pray for justice and healing

We think of those individuals who suffer at the hands of others, who experience discrimination, or contempt or violence; and we pray for comfort and love

We think of our friends, in the church and outside, our neighbours and ourselves, especially . . . and we pray for faithfulness and courage as we try to live out our lives together.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your Name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen

HYMN Sing the Faith 256 (Sydney Carter)

When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a neighbour, were you there?

And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter; were you there?

I was hungry and thirsty; were you there, were you there?

I was hungry and thirsty; were you there?

I was cold, I was naked, were you there, were you there?

I was cold, I was naked, were you there?

When I needed a shelter, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a shelter, were you there?

When I needed a healer, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a healer, were you there?

Wherever you travel, I'll be there, I'll be there,

wherever you travel I'll be there.

And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter,

I'll be there.

The Blessing

Let us conduct our lives during the coming days as bringers of love, as makers of peace, as messengers of hope, knowing that the blessing of God, the source of life, of Jesus Christ, the way to life, and of the Holy Spirit, the sustainer of life, is with us today, tomorrow and forever. Amen.

[Prayers taken and adapted from URC 'Service of the Word']