

Sermon at Norham Church Christ the King, 25th November 2018

Today we celebrate the Festival of Christ the King. Today is also known as ‘Stir Up Sunday,’ from the post-communion prayer that used to be the Collect, and from the tradition that our Christmas puddings should be made, or stirred up, on this day.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus confronted Pilate with an assertion of the nature of the heavenly kingdom, which stands in contradiction to, and judgement of, the kingdoms of the earth. Jesus said,

My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting. ... You say that I am a king. For this ... I came into the world, to testify to the truth.

The Kingdom of God, therefore, is marked by an other-worldly aspect, by non-violence, and by objective truth.

To say that the Kingdom of God is marked by an other-worldly aspect is not to say that Jesus and his followers are so heavenly minded as to be of no earthly use. Jesus said that he ‘came into the world.’ The Kingdom of God is not of the world, but it is in the world, and this has two implications for us as Christians.

Firstly, the Kingdom of God is not of the world. There are times when we might be tempted to despair at the state of the world, at its violence, its poverty, its cruelty, its prejudice. There are times when we might be tempted to despair at the way the world is going, in which some world leaders treat the truth with contempt, and present their lies as ‘alternative facts,’ because ‘might is right’ and they can say whatever they want.

We might be tempted to despair, but we pray the Lord’s Prayer, in which we acknowledge the supremacy of God, and pray that God might lead us from temptation. No matter how bad things are in the world, we have faith in a different kind of world, which is bigger and better than this world. The empires of this earth will pass away, but the Kingdom of God – the rightness and the rule of God – will never pass away.

And then secondly, the Kingdom of God is in the world. There are times when we might be tempted to withdraw from the world, to say, in effect, ‘a plague on all your houses,’ and leave the people of politics to their own devices, in the mistaken belief that the Kingdom of Heaven stands above and beyond the world and its woes.

We might be tempted to withdraw from the world, but we pray the Lord’s Prayer, in which we ask that the Kingdom of Heaven and its values might be realised on earth. God in Jesus did not, and does not, stand above the world in self-righteous judgement. He came down to earth. He got stuck in, as it were, in the world and its woes. God in Jesus met people where they were, and spoke truth to power.

After Jesus had said that, ‘I came into the world, to testify to the truth,’ Pilate famously replied, ‘What is truth?’ Pilate, like some world leaders today, shows ‘no interest in a notion of truth that

lies beyond his immediate interests and political ambitions.’¹ In Matthew’s Gospel, however, Pilate’s wife said, ‘Have nothing to do with that innocent man.’ As so often in the world, the man of power got it wrong, whereas the woman behind the scenes saw things more clearly.

I had an interesting conversation this morning, in which someone asked which had come first, the Collect that begins, ‘Stir up, O Lord, the wills of your faithful people,’ or the tradition that we make our Christmas puddings on the Sunday Next before Advent. She said that she had a vision of the compilers of the Book of Common Prayer, and the housewives of the seventeenth century, getting together to decide the liturgy of the Church of England according to the necessity of domestic life.

I like that vision. The church is not a proper church, if it is so heavenly minded as to be no earthly use. Our weekly worship provides a regular reminder that the ways of this world are not the be all and end all. Our Christian faith must also be grounded in political reality and the lives of ordinary people. We come to church not to escape from the world, but to give us the strength and guidance to live in the world.

So perhaps it is more appropriate that what used to be the Collect is now the post communion prayer on Stir Up Sunday. At the end of our service in church, we continue our service in the world. And we pray,

Stir up, O Lord, the wills of your faithful people;
that we may bring forth the fruit of good works.

¹ *Church Times*, 25.11.18