

Sermon for Christ the King, 22.11.15

Well, here we are at the end of the Church year, the feast of Christ the King, with Advent starting next week..... so we have roughly a month of waiting and getting ready for the most hotly-anticipated event of the year, a mixture of anxiety and excitement as we worry about whether we're going to get what we really want.

Of course you may not be as excited about the new Star Wars film as I am, as a fully paid up geek....and my fellow geeks and nerds will probably remember what happened last time: the intense anticipation followed by crushing disappointment! But it's still an opportunity to consider the interesting question of what Darth Vader would have made of Jesus. Possibly "the Force is strong with this one" (I should say I don't really want to go whether the Force is a good analogy for the Holy Spirit this morning).

Sticking with our theme as the kingdom of God, though, there are one obvious parallel between Darth Vader and Pilate. I'm not saying that Pilate is evil – or indeed any good with a light sabre (this is one of those issues on which the Gospels are silent) – but I think they have similar and highly political views of what an empire or a kingdom actually is, and how it operates. It is a top-down organisation run for the benefit of the elite, the Powers That Be. The people must be kept happy enough or they may refuse to pay their taxes, or even rebel (and the Jews had proved they were very good at this); but overall they are to know their place and to accept it, warts and all. We know from other sources that Pilate was ruthless in putting down demonstrations and challenges to the authority of Rome: in the name of order, if he had been operating on a galactic scale he might well have quite liked the idea of a Death Star. After all, you may not have to use it for people to get the point.

On the other hand, throughout his ministry Jesus talks a lot about a different kind of kingdom, the Kingdom of God. Think of all the images which follow when he says "the Kingdom of God is like....": a mustard seed, a treasure, the action of yeast in dough. Small things, everyday images. Interestingly, what he never does is make the obvious comparisons with contemporary realms his hearers would know: Rome, or Egypt, or Persia: he doesn't even say it will be like them but better, because it will be a "proper" empire run with justice and compassion. A new Golden Age. In fact he explicitly repudiates this idea when Pilate asks him the straight question, "You are a king, then?" with the answer "My kingdom is not of this world".

Now you might think that Jesus is being a bit mealy-mouthed here. In the circumstances – he's on trial for his life, and he knows it – is he trying to back out of what might be considered the most dangerous charge against him as far as the Romans are concerned? It is a clever charge brought against him by clever people.....that he is setting himself up against the political authority of Rome. A charge that touches a nerve. We've already seen what the Romans think of that sort of thing, and how they react.

But the Jesus of the Gospels is never mealy-mouthed – consider all the people he manages to offend! - so that can't be it. What Jesus is talking about to Pilate is a genuinely different idea, a non-political kingdom, a kingdom of the heart that forms, and re-forms, in the tension between the world as we know it to be and the world as we long for it to be, and as God intends it to be. This is revolutionary stuff.

We are maybe over-familiar with the image of Christ the servant King, and even of the term Kingdom of God. So it is worth considering what we mean by that. Among the Jews of Jesus' own time, many would have seen it as quite literally a restoration of the monarchy of Israel which had flourished under David and Solomon. But again, Jesus never makes this comparison: he never says the Kingdom of God is like Israel when David was King. Jesus' genius is to say "the kingdom of God is among you", or in the wonderful Authorised Version translation "the kingdom of God is within you". Remember that he says to a teacher of the law, when they have agreed that the most important thing is love, "You are not far from the kingdom of God". I think it is clear that he is talking about an idea, not a physical state with borders and sentries.

How do we become citizens of this Kingdom? I guess it can sometimes seem to outsiders like arrogance; we can appear to be horribly sure of ourselves and Christians are often accused of thinking that we're better than other people.

I wonder if the main qualification is just that we want to be citizens.....the very opposite of the old Groucho Marx quip that on principle he wouldn't join a club which was prepared to let someone like him be a member! Or to put in more formal theological language, as St Augustine said famously: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you".

This is the Kingdom of which we sometimes say it is here and not yet.

But this is not just to give ourselves a warm comfortable glow, a glib statement that enables us as Christians to come to terms with the world as it really is. As we have seen from the events of the last week, and indeed long before, this isn't just about theoretical theology. There is a new wider relevance to what we think about God's Kingdom and what it says about who we are as his people.

There is an alternative vision of the kingdom of heaven around: the caliphate. This is a high ideal within Islam: a kind of divine kingdom on earth which is perfectly just and prosperous, of the sort that we as Christians think isn't actually possible (although that doesn't let us off the hook for trying). But this noble idea is now best known to the west in a vile parody, deliberately publicised through slaughter, destruction and slavery. It is a strange idea that the rule of a loving God can or should be spread by terror rather than love, although we can't be smug about this as we can come up with our own examples: a friend and former colleague told me about her education in a school run by nuns, where the children were told that with every sin they committed they were nailing Jesus to the Cross all over again. You will not be surprised to know that she is now a confirmed atheist, which I doubt is what the nuns intended.

Jesus also said something else: "by their fruits shall you know them". So how are we to compare these two visions of the kingdom of God?

On the one hand, ISIS and the people like them say: "You are not good enough. You are not pure enough. Clear off. You deserve nothing, you are worth nothing. We hate you. If we find you, we will kill you".

On the other hand, Jesus our king says: "You are not good enough. You are not pure enough. Come. You deserve nothing, you are worth everything. I love you. If you find me, I will bring you life".

Amen