

## **The feast of Christ the King**

**25/11/18**

**St James's, Shirley.**

**Isaiah 2.2-4 - Romans 14.13-19 - Mark 4.26-34**

We've all come across the saying: "Be careful what you ask for". It's the kind of statement that rolls easily off the tongue, partly because what is sometimes called the law of unintended consequences is something appears to resonate with our experience: it's right out there with common sense, as a notion that never gets examined because it seems to be so obviously true.

Such encouragements to be cautious, arguably to do nothing, whatever else they are, they are not what today's readings point us to. Let me explain. We know that Jesus's people yearned for the anointed one of God, the Messiah, to come among them and to make himself known to God's people. What this might mean was a matter of debate, but the expectation, the request, the plea to God was shared widely. Over time, and in a way that we should recognise, this expectation became familiar, conventional and as a consequence, when Jesus began his ministry, there is every indication in the bible that those who encountered him were divided as to who or what he was. Even among his closest followers, there were different reactions to him, and it is clear that they simply didn't get it – at least not at first.

What they couldn't get to grips with was what it meant if in Him they really had got what they asked for. And if this was the case for those who, like his closest disciples, knew him well, imagine what it felt like to Saul of Tarsus. Like any Jew he desired the messiah, but those very expectations initially blinded him to the reality of this desire being fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. It took a personal crisis of the profoundest kind, the kind that reshapes everything, the kind that it takes a lifetime to understand, to convince Paul to realise that what he asked for had been granted. It was devastating in its clarity and challenge. A crisis like this might come about through illness, some great and irreversible event in one's life,

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something that smashes the familiar landmarks, the everyday assurances that seem to make life bearable; through great joy. But however it happens, the person who experiences it knows that life will never be the same again. Paul's crisis is well documented, not least by Paul himself and such a change occurred in him that only a change of name could begin to do justice to his new sense of who he was – and the person he had become was someone who learnt that in fact being careful what you ask for is not what the story of Jesus asks of us. Quite the reverse in fact.

For most of us, though, the temptation is to be cautious remains. We are still learning to take the step that Paul took and to throw caution to the wind. At least once a week, when we worship on Sundays, we say the Lord's Prayer. On the first Sunday of the month, those who attend the 8.00 o'clock service say it twice. Some of us say it far more often than that, but you see what I'm getting at. I mention this because the second petition in that prayer is that God's kingdom will come. It's worth remembering that Jesus wasn't necessarily teaching his followers a prayer, but rather the pattern of all their prayers. In other words, we should pray for the coming of the kingdom every time we pray. Fine. Or is it? Let me read this short passage to you

#### ***Cyprian's caution.***

This was written in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century by a North African bishop, Cyprian of Carthage and if it was true then, it is now – and it means that we are still being very cautious, careless even, about what we ask for – even if we think we're not.

And we are invited to be the opposite of cautious, to throw caution to the wind, to seek the kingdom of God which is radical, demanding and, without the Grace of God, impossible.

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Let's be clear. The kingdom isn't the Church, though we hope and pray that it includes the Church.

It isn't a place, so no theocracies, no statements like 'this is supposed to be a Christian country'.

The kingdom is when God is honoured by compassion that knows no limits. It is when a man is scourged and doesn't fight back. It is when that same man teaches that when given a contemptuous backhander across the face, his followers should turn to receive another slap with the flat of the hand – not as an expression of masochistic weakness. But as a defiant refusal to be treated as less than human even when being subjected to the reality of violence in all its forms – and to defend those who are subjected to its dehumanising effects, whether in the home, the battlefield or the overcrowded boats of desperate refugees. It is a refusal to be defeated, diminished, by anything.

The kingdom is daunting which is why Jesus spoke of it in parables. In these parables we learn a number of things, above all, that the kingdom is not a *nice* place. There is something very earthy about the image of harvest which we can all recognise. There is something very uncompromising about it. There is real insight into human nature in Paul's instructions to the Roman Christians. Here he is explaining how they should live together in disagreement over whether a Christian should eat meat sacrificed in pagan temples before offered for sale to the public. In our terms whether we should separate ourselves from what is deemed impure – or whether, as I believe he makes clear, to immerse ourselves in life in all its richness, so that life may become richer still.

None of this should surprise us. We celebrate a king who rode a donkey, a messiah who was tortured, a Saviour who with infinite love and patience

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continues to teach us his way – the way of the kingdom, for which we continue to pray, though perhaps this time with just a little bit more holy fear, a little more determination to ask for what God wants us to have, rather than merely what we think we need.