

A King like no other

Rev. Alan's sermon from Sunday 24 November 2019

Some of you will already, perhaps, have begun binge-watching Season 3 of much anticipated Netflix drama 'The Crown'. For those who haven't seen it, it's a dramatisation of the life of our Royal Family, and this series, complete with rebooted cast, including national treasure Olivia Coleman, picks up the story in the mid 1960s. Acclaimed though it is, it has not been without its critics. For some, the private lives of the monarchy should remain private. The Royal Family should be beyond conjecture; should maintain that professional distance; remain role models of morality and propriety.

Coincidentally, this Sunday before Advent has, in more recent years, become a celebration of 'Christ the King'. And, for some, that's a rich and helpful image – Christ, after all, deserves our devotion; we are his subjects. For others, this royal image is less helpful – Christ becomes aloof, unapproachable; privileged.

It's interesting that just as we are about to turn our attention to the birth of the Christ Child, our gospel reading today, surprisingly, focusses on his death. Instead of angels and stars and good news, we have thieves and crucifixion and, seemingly, some very bad news. Which begs the question; why? Why would the Church on this particular Sunday want us to think of Calvary and not Bethlehem?

Could it be that Christ's death reveals something essential to the true nature of his kingship? Alongside his birth and his life, his death reveals indeed a king like no other; a king born into poverty, vulnerability, helplessness; a king who lived a servant life, who chose a company of the marginalised and the disreputable; a king who went willingly to the cruellest, most unjust death; a king crowned with thorns.

A king like no other, and unsurprisingly; a king rejected by his subjects. Only a few women and a repentant/perhaps hedging-his-bets thief could see past the humiliation and the disgrace, could see another kind of king; another kind of kingdom.

Everyone else either ran or mocked, because all they could see was weakness, and failure. And I, for one, know I would have been among them.

And yet... and yet, through his birth, his life, his death, and his resurrection, this king was showing us what true royalty, what true power, really looks like.

For it is to be found not in wealth or position; not in ability or respectability. True power is to be found in compassion; in forgiveness; in vulnerability; in service.

As our first reading reveals, this king like no other was revealing what Richard Rohr calls the Universal Christ; the One who reconciles all things in heaven and earth to himself. Birth, life, death, resurrection; all this to reconcile all things to the truth that we are not, and never have been, separate from God. The only thing absent is our awareness. We are, and always have been, held by grace. And, as Anne Lamott so beautifully puts it, 'I do not at all understand the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are, but does not leave us where it found us'.

This king like no other came to bring us face-to-face with grace; with this amazing knowledge that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more; and nothing we can do to make him love us less.

This King like no other understands that we struggle with this, that this is not the way of our world or our kingdoms, or even very often of our religion. And

this king like no other also knows how battered and bruised and bent we are by our histories and our choices; how we've lost that sense of connectedness to the Christ and that kingdom that is within. And the first step towards our rescue and restoration; our repair, is to be reminded, to be reconciled to the fact that we are already One with the divine; not just known, not just loved, but at-One.

I have to admit I haven't seen The Crown, but I am a bit partial to teatime TV favourite The Repair Shop.

Here a team of master craftspeople come together under the same roof to repair and restore damaged and broken 'treasures'; a wicker crib handed down through generations; a wooden stool in the shape of a shell. And, on the surface of it, these are just broken things, worthless; shattered, wood-wormed. And yet to that couple who after seven failed attempts of IVF were finally awaiting a child, that wicker crib symbolised everything called hope. And for that woman, that shell-shaped stool was the only surviving memory of a much loved and long-lost foster-mother.

Lovingly, carefully, generously, these experts rescue, repair, restore and resurrect. And in that moment, when someone is reacquainted with their rescued, now repaired, restored and resurrected treasure, there are so often tears, because actually it's holy ground.

Perhaps you, like I do, will have some 'thing' or possession which, although worthless to anyone else, is priceless to you, because of who it reminds you of or because of what it symbolises to you. These inanimate objects are part of our story, part of us.

And if an object can symbolise and mean so much to me and you, then surely you and I, we must be even more treasured by the Master Craftsman; this rescuer, repairer, restorer; this king like no other.

This is the king to whom I would gladly bow the knee; would freely surrender my will because he will meet me where I am in the damage and neglect, and promises to not leave me as he found me. This king like no other, this Christ who is above all, and through all and in all, deserves my all.

A few days ago, someone sent me this prayer with which I'll end. It's probably the most dangerous prayer I may ever have come across, which is why I want to pray it slowly, so its impact might be felt; it's a prayer if prayed from heart and soul could change just about everything.

May each of us be so fortunate as to be overtaken by God in the midst of little things. May we each be so blessed as to be finished off by God, swooping down from above or welling up from beneath, to extinguish the illusion of separateness that perpetuates our fears. May we, in having our illusory, separate self slain by God, be born into a new and true awareness of who we really are: one with God forever. May we continue on in this true awareness, seeing in each and every little thing we see, the fullness of God's presence in our lives. May we also be someone in whose presence others are better able to recognise God's presence in their lives, so that they, too, might know the freedom of the children of God.