

## Advent Course (week 1) – Waiting for God: Christ the King

A few weeks ago we celebrated Bible Sunday, and here at Holy Innocents' we talked about hermeneutics, or how we rightly interpret the Holy Scriptures. One of the points I'd made was how we look back at them, through our C21 eyes, knowing Jesus as our Messiah; the Christ who offered Himself for that you and I and all creation might be reconciled to God, our Creator. But so very often, we translate images and ideas in a very different way to those that wrote them meant them to be understood.

I have lost count of the times that I have heard the Good Shepherd passages from Jeremiah discussed in terms of good or bad priests, with Jesus the great High Priest, being the One who will Shepherd His Sheep well, unlike that dreadful Rector of ours, who's only gone and changed the hymn book! But actually, the analogy relates to the Kings of Judah. In the ancient near East, Kings were often referred to as Shepherds and the people their flock. So instead of backreading, by which I mean using our C21 interpretation of the shepherd as priest and the sheep as a congregation, actually these images allude to the *devastating* socio-political scattering of a nation, possibly one of the first recorded diaspora, as the Israelites are forced to settle in exile from their beloved homeland. It was akin to what is happening in Syria right here and now, with over a 100,000 people killed and upwards of nine million driven from their homes. No wonder God's people longed for their Messiah.

So, through Jeremiah, and the other prophets, God promises to visit, or 'attend' to these Shepherds, who have chosen war over peace, and idolatry over worship, promising that God will personally gather the people from those places of punishment to which He has driven them, ending the curse of punishment for a time of fruitfulness and blessing. God promises to raise up Royalty that will know the sheep so well that none will be overlooked, and all will live securely. No wonder they were expecting the strength, power and might of a King who would overturn governments and boot out occupying forces. What a Messiah He would be! Can you even begin to imagine how they would have pictured Him?

For ' "the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and He shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which He will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness." '

*And at this juncture I wonder if we might spend a moment of two imagining what it might be like to live in Syria at this time. If you had the family and living circumstances that you do now. If you had all been forced to gather up your belongings – or perhaps run without them – and were fleeing for safe territory. What sort of King would you be looking for to come and stop the madness?*

God calls this Messiah-King a righteous Branch, a Righteous man, but it's a title that holds deeper meanings: this person will be legitimate, rooted and grown from the House of David. The word

Righteous in the original Hebrew can also mean *The Only One*. The King that is to come, will be the Only True King, Righteousness itself – but, and it's a big but - we are not to forget that there is only a line of Kings in the first place because if you recall, the Israelites were not content to be hand-led by God by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night; it was the leaders of the people that had clammered to the Lord, 'Why can't we have a King like all the other nations?'

But this is no ordinary human King that Jeremiah is prophesying about; for ' "this is the name by which He will be called: "The Lord **is** our righteousness." '

Not, the Lord confers righteousness to those especial few on whom He chooses to offer it; nor 'the Lord *could* be our righteousness as long as we play our cards right'; but 'The Lord **IS** our righteousness. Unmerited, unasked for and *absolutely without doubt*: 'The Lord **IS** our Righteousness' whether we know it or not.

How extraordinary! And how very difficult for us to imagine what we might have been waiting for, given that we have already been given the 'happy ever after'?

But I wonder, have there been times in our lives when we have cried out to God about this or that situation, about our longings or hopes for this or that person, or even for ourselves, for that matter?

*Perhaps we could take a moment, now, to think about an ongoing situation that we would love to see God's Spirit move through – what would we like to see happen, ideally? How would our imagination see God resolve it if we had our way? Or, if you are perfectly content at this time, remember sometime in the past when you longed for something to come to pass. In particular I'd like you to remember the emotions the situation stirred, whether they be anger or disappointment, sadness or any other.*

The prophetic scriptures remind us that this Israelite King, this Christ, is the One in whom we shall see the very nature of God – not just in His Jewish nose, or olive skin, nor his black curls or his extraordinary wisdom and way with women – for one can only assume that they were expecting Kings David and Solomon rolled into one with knobs on, but in the Messiah's profound justice and love for His people. What they weren't to know at that time was that the image of God would be most profoundly seen through Christ's willingness to reach down into the darkest depths to retrieve all that has become entangled with sin and sickness and even death itself. Their long awaited Messiah was definitely not of the terrestrial kind.

Now I went to see Gravity last week and as it was in 3-D you really felt as if you were inside a spacesuit looking out at the universe hoping against hope that the hatch would open in time as satellite debris rounded the curve of the earth and shot towards you. It really put into perspective how very small the earth – and even our lives – are compared to the vast unknown in which we sit as securely as if we had half a clue about what on earth keeps us spinning here like we do.

Did you know that thirty-three light years away there is an exoplanet completely covered in burning ice? Sounds a bit like a galactic Arctic roll, doesn't it? Or that ten thousand light years away is a cloud of alcohol 463 billion billion miles across – enough for 400 trillion, trillion pints of beer? The Earth tilts at roughly 66 degrees and you will probably know that 70% of it is water. But did you know that only 3% water of the earth is fresh, and 97% salted? Of that 3% of fresh water, over 2% is frozen in ice sheets and glaciers, meaning that less than 1% fresh water is found in lakes, rivers and underground. This winter alone around 1 septillion (1, 000, 000, 000, 000, 000, 000, 000, 000 or a trillion trillion) snowflakes will drop from the sky. And finally, a little closer to home; there are more bacteria living in 1cm of your colon than humans than have ever lived! What an extraordinary universe we live in.

Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it like this;

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.  
And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

No matter what we do – and are doing – to destroy creation, it's inherent divinity cannot be hidden – and that goes for each and every human being, no matter how they have lived their lives. So this vast universe, indeed, even the powers and principalities will be subject to this King –even the powers of hell and damnation. The Christ cannot redeem *all* if He does not redeem even hell itself, however you understand Sheol.

Last Sunday, as we celebrated Christ the King, we read in Colossians, 'for in Him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He himself is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.'

‘through Him God was pleased to reconcile to Himself **all things**, whether on earth or in heaven.’

ALL THINGS! All people, all places, all powers and principalities, all sin and sickness and death itself, in order that we might be reconciled to the Lord our Righteousness, the Only True King, Righteousness itself.

*And now we shall take a moment to think again. What would such a Messiah look like, a Messiah would could do such a thing? What would be His size, his demeanour? Could He look remotely humanoid that He holds the universe itself within Him? And what resemblance does this Messiah have to the King who would step into Syria or any other occupied territory bringing political peace?*

*And now that we have two deeply different images of this person, how do they compare with the One who would step into your longings and mine, righting wrongs and bringing healing?*

Throughout Advent we remember the longing of a people expectant for one or other of those images of a King, a Messiah; their Christ. And today we continue to long, for God’s Kingdom to come, to justice to be served, for the reality of the forgiveness we know we have been given but cannot believe or accept. We await the eschatological Advent, too, the final day when Christ comes again to gather all of creation to Himself, ourselves included.

And of course we have all sorts of varying images of that whether they be Jesus literally riding in on clouds of glory, a reign of peace upon the earth as God’s kingdom comes, or something so spiritually beyond our understanding that we have neither words nor images for it. And what do we get?

A little tiny baby, born in a cattle-shed amongst the filth to an unmarried mother, with a silent Joseph in the background, cattle lowing, far from anywhere they could call home.

What an anti-climax! How short-changed would those exiled people have felt that for all their prayerful longing, this is their answer? A baby, lying in a feeding trough, literally born in a barn.

*For our final time of personal thought before our discussion, I wonder if, thinking back to the memories we considered earlier this evening, whether or not we have experienced any sense of anti-climax about how we thought things might be resolved? Were we disappointed by death; defeated by disappointment or simply disregarded by a God who does not answer when we most want Him too, or in such a way that flies in the face of all we had longed for?*

We still hear the echoes of those laughing at a Christ who appears to be powerless as rulers ride roughshod over people, places and pecuniary interests; and now we hear derision aimed at those who follow Him, too. Here at Holy Innocents’ Church we remember the slaughter of thousands of young children in an attempt to wipe Jesus out. But whether we hang on our own crosses, awaiting the

fulfillment of God's promise to us in Jesus Christ our Lord, or whether we suddenly recognize that we suffer only as a consequence of our own brokenness and ask Jesus to remember us in our fallen state - Advent being every bit as penitential as Lent - Christ our King does not rule remotely from some Whitehall address, or tax haven in the Caribbean.

We are being called to remember a Creator God who in spite of making things in their trillions, with a vastness we can barely comprehend, stoops down into the tiniest of newborn human hearts, making there His home. We are being called to long for Christ's return, for the culmination of all that He has achieved as we are recalled to that perfect state of bliss in which we are reconciled to God and God to us.

For our salvation isn't conditional; it isn't for the chosen few; it isn't for these sheep but not those and neither can we run beyond the reach of God's love – not even if we managed to break beyond earth's atmosphere and traverse the universe itself; 'For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to Himself **all** things, whether on earth or in heaven'

Hard as it is to put ourselves in Jewish shoes that are two thousand years old, would you have imagined that this tiny baby could be Christ our King: 'The Lord **is** our righteousness', 'The Only One'?

## **Discuss**

### **Additional Questions if necessary**

Do we see Advent as a season of repentance or longing? In what way?

Do we ever dare to dream of Christ's return? (Why not?)

Do we think as a people we (Christians) have lost a sense of desire? What might that look like if it were to revive?

*End with Candlelit Compline*