

## Summing Up?

**PREACHER : The Venerable Peter Lock, Archdeacon**

Rochester Cathedral  
Sunday, November 11<sup>th</sup> 2006  
Sung Eucharist : 10.30am

Daniel 7.9-10,13-14; Rev.1.4b-8; John 18.33-37  
Lit Yr B ; Season – Christ the King

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I don't know whether you've ever had to write an obituary, but it's not the easiest thing to do. If you know the person well, as a friend for instance, then you might be tempted to overestimate qualities and play down the nagging faults. If, on the other hand, you don't know the subject well enough then you're just as likely to miss out some really important contribution he or she has made to the people who they lived with.

It has been interesting to hear this week the praise for Nick Clarke, the presenter of radio's *The World at One* who sadly died following a fight against cancer. It was heartening to hear hardened journalists speak tenderly and movingly about the colleague and friend they clearly admired for the quality of the way he interviewed people, always keeping a sense of politeness albeit with a well crafted, awkward question to a politician or leader of industry, always listening to the answer and using it to launch the next question which might be the interviewee's undoing.

One of the most astute of obit writers was Hugh Massingberd<sup>1</sup> who wrote many obituaries in the Daily Telegraph over the years and developed the art of subtle hint or perceptive comment to convey in few words what a person's character was like. Most of all - it was understatement that he used. For instance – how about this piece he wrote about the flamboyant pianist Liberace (some of you may remember him for his sequins, candles and lace cuffs). This is what Massingberd wrote:

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<sup>1</sup> Book of Obituraries. Ed by Hugh Massingberd. Macmillan 1995

*Perhaps to lend himself an air of ruggedness with which nature had not chosen to endow him, he adopted the name 'Walter Buserkeys' when he embarked on his early career.....Liberace's private tastes were steeped in the absence of sobriety.*

Masterly!

But how do you sum up a person's life? Can you sum up a person's life? How do you measure the impact a person has made on those around him or her? There is always, too, something interior in each one of us that remains hidden from everyone apart from, maybe, a very few who know us best. What sort of battles have they had to endure within themselves? What sort of hidden hurts have they carried without anyone else knowing? What sort of joys have they had apart from the use of the skills with which they have been endowed?

I was already thinking about these things when I came to this Sunday which ends the church's liturgical year. Next Sunday is Advent Sunday, the beginning of a new liturgical year for the church which as always is centred on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the influence he had on the early church. But this Sunday is a sort of summing up of all that the church has been reading throughout the past year around the person of Jesus, from his birth to his death, from his resurrection to his ascension, for his affect on a small band of witnesses whose message began to resound around the Mediterranean. And it's given the title – Christ the King.

It's interesting that in John's gospel the only other person to directly refer to Jesus as King is Nathanael, right at the beginning in the first chapter. Other inferences are made, such as Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on the donkey, but it is left later in the gospel narrative for Pilate to enquire 'Are you king of the Jews?' Pilate is being torn from pillar to post, and at this moment the author sees him at one moment going outside to talk to the Jews who have brought Jesus for the inquisition, then inside to question Jesus, then outside again. Seven times he shuttlecocks too and fro as he tries to fumble his way to making a decision about what to do. Eventually of course Pilate turns Jesus over to the soldiers who make mock of him by dressing him like a king. For our author, John, this is the supreme irony because for him Jesus is the king. But what sort of a king?

Indeed, the title of 'king' is one which clearly Jesus is uncomfortable with. He pushes the question back to Pilate, as if to get him to make the declaration which Pilate does – in a sort of begrudging way.

Of all the titles that are used of Jesus the one which he himself appears to favour is not 'king' but rather the more enigmatic *Son of Man*, a title which we would have heard in the OT lesson had it not been given its alternative translation – 'human being' or 'man'. In Jewish literature it is a technical term which is not altogether clear but has often been used in Jewish apocalyptic for the one who will return to usher in the final battle and celebrate the banquet when God's reign begins on earth and Israel is finally redeemed. Quite whether Jesus was emphasising his humanity or his mystical leadership has been the discussion for theologians over the years. And maybe he chose this *because* it was enigmatic. It wouldn't tie him down to a precise description but would hint at something of his own understanding of himself and which others must make up their own minds about.

Another title might be – again shared with the OT – is *The suffering servant*. When Jesus is interrogated by Pilate it is quite clear to the reader that Jesus is an innocent victim, one who is there on trumped up charges and who is facing the full force of political and religious authority. He is the one who will take the blame, carry the hurts and the failings of others in a far deeper way than those who have brought him to this moment.

Many of the pictures in stained glass windows and mediaeval and renaissance paintings would have Jesus rather like an earthly emperor, robed and on a throne. The magnificent ceiling in the Baptist interior in Florence has Christ high up, arms outstretched surrounded by a background of gold. But in this stunning mosaic the king wears no crown. Rather – a halo. And he looks directly at you, even from a distance, as if to engage your attention, probing you for a reaction, just as Pilate found the tables turned on him.

This King wears no crown, apart from the thorns which were pressed on his head as part of his torture. This king carries no sign of stately office but a cross. His coronation was crucifixion. He has no bodyguards because it is his body which guards ours. His kingdom is the hearts and minds of people. His power is not physical force but vulnerable love. This king carries his people's burdens, and the burdens he came to release them from – blindness, imprisonment, poverty. He became the word he preached – a light to the nations. What he said was who he was. Above all he came to bring people to faith in his Father's love and glory.

No wonder his story is to be re-told year by year for us to find new depths and fresh challenges - even to discover that an obituary is only published when a person has died and their life has finished. For this Christ is risen. There is no need for an obituary - for he lives in his church, weak and frail as it sometimes is. No obituary – only gospels which are good news. He lives in the lives of those who would trust him. He can, too, be found in the unexpected places in the lives of the poor and the maimed and the marginalised, the suffering and the starving. This man of sorrows is also the king of creation and his story is still going on!

As TS Eliot observed in his poem *Little Gidding*

*We shall not cease from our exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*

Christmas begins to beckon. Be stirred! For this king began life in a crib and was executed on a rubbish tip. Yet we proclaim him King of kings and Lord of lords.