

KERPOW – BANG – CRASH!!!!

PREACHER : Canon Neil Thompson, Precentor

Sunday, November 22nd 2009

Christ the King

10.30am

Rochester Cathedral

KERPOW – BANG – CRASH!!!!

Yes, God detonates a bomb in our midst in this cathedral!

It is an explosion of love and no one will get hurt ...but it is an act of power and it will disrupt life and turn everything upside down in what may feel like utter destruction, disruption and chaos.

Time and time again through the Christian ages we have made God in our image and subverted his power of love and debased the immeasurable mystery of sacrifice, forgiveness and humility.

Coming here to worship God should be unsettling to our human complacency.

God's word and the sacraments help us to grow, and so they destabilise all that has become habit and prejudice as a defence to secure our comfort and our sense of wellbeing come what may.

We so need things to be safe.

We know that disasters befall our lives – this past week has seen flood waters overwhelm and take life in our own land.

And there is great reason to fear change, loss of control and the risk of trusting another.

Yet that is the essence of true community and society – it is the essence of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

God has a painful lesson to teach us: that to be free we have to change and grow and often it will feel like loss and submission.

Today sees the last Sunday in the Church's year, when we celebrate the theme of the triumph and glory of God's reign in Christ the King.

But we have real problems with this imagery and we must be prepared to see everything recast and a new landscape of power and service unfolded.

In this land we proudly have an ancient monarchy that has flourished and developed so as to allow a constitutional democracy and a focus of unity through a dutiful and devoted Queen.

But the worldly glory of monarchy can mislead us in our understanding and service of God.

This same past week has also seen our thoughts being turned to Europe and the division lines between national sovereignty and a wider political consensus and union.

Power is very real – and Christians must not shy away from discussing it and exercising it; it is critical that Christ's people lead as well as serve and integrate whilst remaining clearly and distinctively men and women of faith.

The world around us is familiar and we fear change that threatens our material comfort and security.

Yet we know that climate change, fundamentalism, Third World poverty and disease and the ever-present threat of nuclear proliferation and war are issues that we would dearly like to go away - but won't.

And here, in the first decade of the 21st century, the developed world is caught in an intellectual and moral vacuum.

Post modernism turns its back on meaning which provides an over-arching story for humankind.

And in the place of religious faith and intellectual daring we have opted for materialism and consumerism in a world whose meaning is understood principally in terms of self and self-interest and self advancement.

Back in the early 1980's I remember sitting in a church meeting in Woolwich in south London (I think I must have been rather bored!!) and on a notice board by my shoulder I read the contents including the following quote from the Calvinist theologian and sub prior and co-founder of the Taizé Community, Br Max Thurian:

Western European culture and society is more resistant to the Gospel than any other.

It certainly made me think at the time and it is something that I have never forgotten - for that is how powerful the prevailing culture is in its challenge to Christianity and the Church.

On this Sunday, God gives us a vision of his power and rule in Jesus Christ.

It makes enormous demands and the authority of Bible and the celebration of the sacraments are like an explosion to the prevailing thought patterns and assumptions that we so readily adopt.

Let me give you a non-Biblical example.

Those of you who know me well will be aware that mathematics is not my strongest suit!

Yet now that I have left school (just!) and no longer have to take maths exams (yippee!), at a very basic level I do find the values and notation of mathematics fascinating and beautiful.

In the market and in everyday living we do our arithmetic using base 10, whereas the world of computing uses the binary system, base 2.

Both are reasonable and valid but they create very different worlds through their computation patterns.

Similarly we map the world by geographic size using land mass and area.

But you may have seen alternative atlases showing the world as mapped using all kinds of base values such as population, wealth (Gross National Product), food production or even fresh water.

Each produces a very, very unfamiliar world to the one we think that we inhabit.

If you have never seen one, this all might seem rather puzzling so please imagine our British mainland measured in terms of population: the Scottish Highlands which are territorially very large shrink to nothing, and London, Manchester, Birmingham, the Midlands etc become huge.

And the same is true of God and his values and his Kingdom.

His Kingdom redraws our human world view.

His values reconfigure the jungle rule of might is right and survival at whatever cost.

And here in the image of Christ the King he speaks this different language of power and status and love.

The very image of king goes back thousands of years and is often associated with the power of tyrants, warriors, dynastic families, parasites, ciphers ...and the wisdom of political cunning.

In the Old Testament set against this kind of background, God's people learn of a kingship which is based on the personal care of the shepherd – a pastoral power of protection, guidance and even self-sacrificing goodness.

Israel's kings signally failed to live up to this metaphor and vision and the prophets repeatedly served God's judgment on the betrayal of faithfulness to God, the covenant and this vision of love and care.

In Jesus, kingship becomes even more radical and revolutionary.

Distinctly coming from the line of King David, Jesus is born in Bethlehem but in a stable; his parents are forced to flee as refugees from the murderous jealousy of King Herod and ultimately, for the powers of this world, he is tried and sentenced to death.

And a foreign consul of an invading empire ascribes his cross with the title *King of the Jews*.

In a theocentric world, one where God reigns, power is focussed and even centred on homelessness and execution.

So what kind of values prevail in such images - and how do they transfigure that which we aspire to, work with and see as respectable and proper?

God's love and truth explodes and shatters our superficial and selfish thinking and values every time we worship him and hear his voice and receive his life in Jesus.

This is the world that little Thomas and Imogen enter today through baptism as full members of Jesus' eternal family.

They, like us, have nothing to fear from God except his rule and peace and justice, in short his love.

And as the reading from the Book of Revelation states, Jesus Christ is *the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth*.

And his kingdom as Jesus tells Pontius Pilate and us in John's Gospel is *not from here*.

We don't make this kingdom ourselves but we can participate in it and we can share in building it up in and through the power of God's grace in Jesus.

Pilate asks Jesus, 'so you are a king?'

Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.'

Where is that voice today, now?

It is in the explosion of love that shatters so as to rebuild.

*Thou art God; no monarch Thou
Thron'd in easy state to reign;
Thou art God, Whose arms of love
Aching, spent, the world sustain.* W.H. Vanstone

Amen