

## **St Botolph's Church Worthing**

**20 November 2016**

**Jeremiah 4: 23: 1 – 6**

**Colossians 1: 11 – 20**

**Luke 23: 33 – 43**

**Reverend Raymond Wood**

### **Christ the King: God, the great lover**

Today is dedicated in the Common Worship Lectionary as "Christ the King". The Roman Catholic Church introduced an autumn 'Festival of Christ the King' in 1970; and since the year 2000 it has been used in the Church of England. That was after I retired so I have not preached on this festival before today. Some of our modern churches are dedicated to "Christ the King", notably the ecumenical one in Milton Keynes opened by the Queen.

What is the meaning of the Kingship of Christ? In the Book of Common Prayer, except for Ascension-tide, it is not an aspect that we particularly stress, but in the Collect for the Sunday after Ascension, we address God the Father as "the King of Glory". This is the only time in our Sunday Collects that he is addressed in this fashion; though undoubtedly God is indeed King. For we pray in our Lord's own prayer "thy kingdom come". St Paul in his first letter to Timothy (6.15) refers to the Father as "the blessed and only Sovereign, King of Kings and Lord of Lords". Yet the message of this Sunday is certainly that Jesus is also King. At his Ascension, the Father crowned him King. Our hymn writers are sure of this. Isaac Watts, Charles and John Wesley, James Montgomery, and others, are all of one mind on this point. In the words of Charles Wesley: "Rejoice the Lord is King! Your Lord and King adore" (Hymn EH443).

This festival was introduced to witness to the power and authority that Christ now has over many millions of people, and their influence affects the areas in which they live. True his authority may only reign in a minority of hearts but we Christians have a certain hope that, in the end, his reign will be worldwide and in all mankind. His victory over death and sin, which he gained on earth, is now being fulfilled here by his body, the church.

It has been said that the home of God is in the heart of mankind; and the home of mankind is in the heart of God. This Sunday re-echoes that the home of mankind is in the heart of God. Though how far do young people today regard that wonderful place as their home? We simply do not know but I am sure that the young in Worthing are not all pagans, even if they are not worshipping Christians. A survey some time back in a Comprehensive School, showed that although very few of the boys and girls there were regular churchgoers, yet most of the 6th Form girls and half the 6th Form boys believed in God as revealed by Jesus. An impartial survey today is likely to reveal similar figures in spite of what we are often led to believe.

Dr Norman Pittenger was a lecturer in America and Canada for many years until returning to Cambridge in a similar capacity. In an article entitled

“Christian faith in the future”, he told of his experiences in lecturing to 6th formers and college students: though as I can confirm from my own experience with him at college, he often did not so much lecture as listen. He had an excellent brain as well as an ability to share ideas with younger people; which is not always a combined talent in academic circles! In his article two elements stand out most strongly.

The first is that the young people he had met wish to think of God as the “Great Lover”. I had not thought of God in that way before, but it is a good title. We do not normally think of kingship with love, but today we are reminded of the enduring love of our own Monarch. For this is the 69th anniversary of the marriage of our Queen to Prince Philip in 1947. I am sure that their love has contributed to the strong Christian foundation of Queen Elizabeth’s rule.

Pittenger did not mean the selfish lover epitomized by Rudolf Valentino, or more recent screen idols. Rather it is based on the letters of St John with their theme song “God is Love”. It was taken up by Thomas Cranmer in the translation of our Book of Common Prayer, and beautifully summarised in the Collect for the 6th Sunday after Trinity.

“O God, who hast prepared for them that love thee such good things as pass man’s understanding: pour into our hearts such love towards thee, that we, loving thee above all things, may obtain thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire”.

Here the lovers of the Great Lover, are asking for his gift of love.

The theme is also continued in some of our hymns. St Thomas a Kempis puts it this way in Hymn EH425:

“O love, how deep, how broad, how high!

It fills the heart with ecstasy  
that God, the Son of God, should take  
our mortal form for mortals’ sake”.

This speaks of the Great Lover in action.

A more modern hymn (CP 542) says:

“O love that wilt not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in thee  
I give thee back the life I owe  
That in thine ocean depths its flow  
May richer, fuller, be”.

It is assuring us that those who regard God as the Great Lover are not far from the kingdom of heaven.

The second point that Norman Pittenger made is the young person’s picture of the function of the church. One teen-aged girl expressed it in these words: “to make love prevail everywhere”. This describes the church’s function admirably, even if the church does not always show it this way.

It is my privilege to have known many people who try to fulfil this function in their own particular way, even though most of them are unlikely to use such a description for themselves. Most of them are unknown outside the immediate circle of their own parish. But one internationally known figure, who did just

that, was Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who has since been declared a Saint in the Roman Catholic Church. She received world- wide recognition for her work in India; but she and her Sisters of Charity had homes in other places, including Belfast and Haarlem. She spoke with the voice of a true servant of the Great Lover; telling how her Sisters treat the cruel, the unchristian, the drug addicts, and the IRA, as spoiled images of Christ himself. Here is not just the voice of a Roman Catholic nun, but the voice of Christianity itself. The voice of one striving to make love prevail everywhere.

Love and loyalty to God and to the Ascended Christ is the call to all Christians at this festival. If it seems a daunting prospect, we need not be too downcast; for although we continue to work for our Parish, the future is in his hands, not ours.

AMEN

Rev Raymond Wood

20.11.16