

Jesus The King

Ezek. 34:15 I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will show them where to rest. I shall look for the lost one, bring back the stray, bandage the wounded and make the weak strong.

It was Prince Charles' 60th birthday last week. I wonder if he'll ever be King Charles. Sky television celebrated the occasion by holding a debate about whether Britain wanted a King at all. Peter Tatchell thought that Britain would do better to drop the Windsors and have someone like nice Irish Mary Robinson as president instead.

But I expect for the moment tradition will win and Charles will get to be crowned. And most Britons will welcome him. There are lots of Kings all around the world who have no-one to rule over, like poor King Zog II. Isn't that a name to conjure with; King Zog of Albania - except that no-one in Albania recognizes him, though I gather he has been allowed to go back home.

I mention all this because it's the last Sunday of the church year. In the old days the collect for the Sunday before Advent began "Stir up, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people" and prudent housewives knew that they had better do some stirring and get on with the Christmas pudding. Nowadays, at the end of our church year we very appropriately celebrate the feast of Christ the King. That's what the epistle today was about. In the end Jesus shall reign over all the earth and lay it down before the Father.

King Jesus. The trouble is that at the moment, never mind in the last days, at the moment he doesn't seem to have many more people to rule over than King Zog! St Paul gives us this wonderful picture of King Jesus who has overcome every enemy, every sovereignty and power, every rival to God's authority, bringing his kingdom in triumph to the Father. A picture of Jesus entering the rebellious human world and rescuing it, transforming it, bringing restored humanity back to God.

Yes, well. Look around you. Do we see more and more people acclaiming Jesus as King? Do we see a world transformed? Do we see as church growing? Or is Jesus like King Zog, a king with no subjects. Is it all a failed dream?

Actually I am not one of those who think that religion is dying in the modern world. It's true that less and less people in Europe go to church, even counting Roman Catholics and born again pentecostals. But that's not true in Africa where Christianity grows by leaps and bounds, or Eastern Europe, or even North America where no Presidential candidate could ever dare to say they didn't go to Church. Even Sarah Palin, bless her little moosehunting heart, is a rather fundamentalist Christian. Church going world-wide isn't falling away. We mustn't confuse the picture in Europe or Australia or New Zealand with the world wide picture where Christianity continues to grow.

But that's not really what I mean. Organized mainline church religion is clearly declining in many places. And it is sad to see Anglicanism in decline there; let's hope it is only temporary. I do believe that Anglicanism has great treasures to share - in fact I am going to Mpumalanga this week to run a course on treasures of Anglicanism for the clergy of that Diocese. But I doubt if God pins his hopes on the Anglican Communion.

It's not numbers in church that matter. In that great parable of the last judgement in Matthew today, King Jesus separates out the sheep and the goats. The sheep are welcomed. "Come, you whom my father has blessed, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.". The goats are told, "Go away." But on what basis? Does the king say, "You came to church often, so welcome". "You know the responses for Evensong, so welcome". Does he even say, "You said your prayers every night, so welcome." The basis of judgement has nothing to do with that but only, "did you feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked".

That doesn't mean that worship and liturgy and prayer don't matter. It means that in one way they are means to an end; the message that the prophets of old tried so hard to get across to the ancient Jewish people. God wants justice, not sacrifice. We worship him not just by sitting in church but by feeding his sheep.

Earnest Christians often see the modern world as a battle ground between faith and secularism. And in their hearts they fear that faith is losing the battle. I don't see it like that. For one thing I don't think that religion is dying out even in the West. I think that having lost touch with the Church people try all sorts of other religions. Or they believe in God but think they can go it on their own without church. They haven't become secular. They've just lost touch with organized Christianity.

But my real point is that despite wars and refugees and crime and corruption, I think society in general is becoming more gentle. There is more commitment in the world to feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless. Pop stars hold benefit concerts. G8 financiers give huge government grants. Rich entrepreneurs set up charitable foundations. People may not go to church but the kingdom of God is slowly becoming more real. God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year.

This is just a sermon not a book on theology. So I know I've left out important qualifiers. I know that worship matters. I know that human fallibility means we need the grace of God. I know we need sacraments and prayer and grace. I know that it matters that in the sort of Western society most of us live in the church is at the moment declining. I know that a churchless, Christless moral life is not enough. But I think in his parable Jesus is saying that the person who cares for the needy is serving and worshipping Christ without knowing what he does. The kingdom of God is about gentleness and kindness and care for the weak. And despite all the disasters I think these things are growing.

I could end the sermon here. But there is Ezekiel, our first reading. If people are searching more and more for a righteous society, why don't they come to Church which is the foretaste of God's kingdom. Many reasons, I am sure, but part of it is that they don't see that churchiness works. People stop coming to church in part because they don't see a great difference in the quality of our lives. They don't look at us and always see radiant care for our neighbour.

I quite like reading the letters to the editor in the newspaper. There was one the other day gently criticizing me. I had written a review about a book by one Michel Onfray which attacks on Christianity and its ethics. I had said that Onfray didn't tell us what he would put in its place. I was taken to task by Bob Crass, who often writes to the paper. Bob, although the son of a minister, is a fervent atheist. He said he was sure I knew that many atheists are just as moral as religious people. And of course we I know that's true. Bob himself is an immensely kind man. He is an authority on trout fishing. He once offered to teach me how to cast a fly.

So there's part of the problem. We Christians look just the same as, maybe even not as kind as, Bob Crass. Michel Onfray is more harsh. If religion was just harmless nonsense, he says, but it did some good in the world, we could look at it with toleration. But it isn't. Religions promote war, they promote inquisitions, they supported Nazism, they supported apartheid, and they still take the side of oppressors to this day.

Onfray overstates his case, as I said in my review. But because his charge is only minutely true, people turn away. Churches haven't done a great job in living out the values of the kingdom.

Back to that lovely passage from Ezekiel this morning. The shepherds whom God has placed over his people have failed, so God himself will enter the world to be our shepherd, and restore peace and prosperity for his flock. As Christians we can't help but see Jesus as the fulfilment of Ezekiel's prophecy. "I will pasture my sheep; I myself will show them where to rest. I shall look for the lost one, bring back the stray, bandage the wounded and make the weak strong.

But then the jarring note. "Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet?". Among the people of Israel whom God has lovingly rescued and pastured there are fat sheep and lean sheep and the fat sheep shove the weak ones out of their way. In the Church, the society of the redeemed, we squabble, we bully each other, we keep our class divisions.

So here's the point. There's the church. No better than the rest of the world. Maybe sometimes worse. The Church is a means to an end. It's a means to building the kingdom of God in the world. But despite some noble moments it doesn't always do that very well. In fact sometimes in its behaviour it even seems an enemy of the kingdom. We quarrel;. We shove the weak out of the way.

Jesus is King. We who are his subjects and his servants are not always very reliable. Some people who don't even know about him prove to be better subjects than us! So God is not defeated or deflected. His spirit works invisibly in unexpected ways and places. The Church may sometimes fail. The Church may in some cases for the moment be in decline. But the world is becoming a better place. Jesus is still King though his subjects may not know it. God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year. Nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be, when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.