

My favourite subject at school was, probably unsurprisingly, English Literature. I loved the world it opened up to me, the metaphysical poets, Shakespeare, the gothic novels, Hardy, Steinbeck, Golding, Austen. It has made me love the art of reading to this day, allowing words to build and furnish new worlds in Sci-Fi and fantasy, or to challenge my thinking in this world. None more so than the War Poets. I vividly remember being introduced to the likes of Philip Johnstone, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfrid Owen, and their words have stayed with me, even more so when I discovered the affinities with Sassoon and Owen, fighting on more than one front. But it is Owen's *Dulce et Decorum est* which most impacted me, I had learned it by heart so enraptured was I by it, by the world it conjured in its choice of words and metre, horrifying, challenging brutal. And in my 1980's council estate naiveté I couldn't conceive of a world that could have as its motto *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*, taken from the Latin poet Horace, "it is sweet and proper to die for one's country."

So, imagine my surprise when, just tidying up in the Peter Chapel my eye caught that familiar 'old lie' as Owen called it, not in an ironic use but in the very use that Owen rails against, on a memorial to men from Berwick who fought in the Boer War. The lies we tell ourselves, even in church. That discomfort with how close we tread the line in honouring the sacrifice of men

and women and not glorifying the act of war is especially acute on this Feast Day. Christ the King is a thoroughly modern feast, introduced into the Roman Catholic Calendar by Pope Pius XI in 1925 originally observed on the last Sunday of October. Since 1970 it has ended the Church's liturgical year and was introduced officially into the Church of England calendar as late as 1997. In the aftermath of the First World War and the re-surfacing tensions of nationalism and military power the Church wanted to bring the liturgical year to a conclusion with a triumphant celebration of Christ's universal lordship over heaven and earth. There is much to critique in the Church's appropriation of military power over the years in relation to this feast, but in itself it is subversive, all our readings point us away from our traditional understandings of power and triumph.

In Jeremiah we have a word of hope, of restoration after the long exile, a different model of Kingship, the Shepherd King, deliberately recalling the golden reign of David the shepherd boy made king. It will be a rule of righteousness and of justice, where the Lord will be their righteousness. "The days are surely coming," says the Lord, they are coming.

Paul's letter to the Colossians is full of talk of power, strength, rulers, authorities and dominion. It is a rich densely packed theological seam that we could mine for hours. It is Paul praying for his listeners, interceding for them that they may know the coming kingdom of God, fully shown and experienced in Jesus Christ. But all this talk of power and strength and might leads us some where surprising, not to the throne room of heaven as we might expect, but to the cross.

And the cross is where find Jesus in our Gospel reading on this feast of Christ the King. The kingdom of God that Christ ushers in comes not from power and military might but through a broken body hanging on a cross. We have to look down not up for God's kingdom

And even in these last moments, with his dying breaths, Christ ushers in his kingdom with forgiveness to those who have brought it to this, for those who have advocated redemptive violence, and hope for the one who asks for God's kingdom to come even as he too dies. There is no military might on display here, despite the crowds demanding it! There is no smiting of enemies, or angelic warriors descending, despite the possibility of that happening, as Jesus tells Pilate at his trial. God's kingdom **has** been ushered in by healing the sick,

raising the dead, releasing the oppressed, bringing good news to the poor, and now through broken body and blood outpoured. God's kingdom comes not in the condemnation of the thief but through his forgiveness. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, the true Shepherd King.

The dying thief asks perhaps what we all seek, that we might know God's kingdom in reality, after all isn't that what we pray every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, thy kingdom come? That the abundance of God's kingdom, the abundance of God's blessing may be known in our world of scarcity.

And it is in Jesus' reply, "today you will be with me in Paradise," that we find the answer. When Luke has Jesus say 'today' he's not referring to a 24-hour period, but to the reign of Christ as King, the present abundant reign here and now even as wait for it in all its fulness. When Jeremiah talks about the time to come, he's not talking about an eschatological event, he's talking about something happening here and now in time.

Returning to the War Poets, I remember writing one of my A Level essays on the four-line poem of Herbert Asquith, *Nightfall*

*Hooded in angry mist, the sun goes down:*

*Steel-gray the clouds roll out across the sea:*

*Is this a Kingdom? The give Death the crown,*

*For here no emperor hath won, save He.*

That raw bleakness, that emptiness and surrender to the inevitable surrounds our own society. From the climate emergency to the rise of the far-right again, from despair of politicians to mistrust of anyone with power. And it is into that context that this Feast speaks most powerfully.

“Jeremiah looks for a time when his people will be rescued, and the Colossians know that they have been already. Luke gives us that supremely paradoxical picture of Jesus, hanging helplessly in pain and near death, yet still the King, opening the gates of his kingdom to the bewildered, misled, barely human rabble around him. As he asks for forgiveness for the crowd, and as he leads the thief into his kingdom, he is in his agony, still the one whom all thrones, dominions, rulers and powers must acknowledge as Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” the dying thief asks. Jesus has come into his kingdom and you and I are remembered. In the face of

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections Year C*, p.131

power misused and abused in our political life, in our economic life, in almost every area of our life. We might not be remembered by the fake king in the White House, the grasping emperor in the Kremlin or the clumsy courtier in Downing Street, but we are remembered by the King of the Universe. And it is that King whose kingdom we seek daily.

As we prepare to enter Advent, we prepare to wait again for the coming of Christ, both in his incarnation at Christmas, and in his final return at the end of time. Today's feast has us looking at where Christ's kingdom is today, even as we wait for it to come in all its fulness. We look down, not up. Not down in despair but looking for the green shoots of God's kingdom growing amongst us. We bring in God's Kingdom through our prayer, our reading of the Bible, our worship because in all of that we are transformed. We bring in God's kingdom by looking out not in, by giving generously not just individually but as a congregation. We bring in God's kingdom today, here and now, by being the unique person God has called each one of us to be.

We take our leave of Luke's Gospel this morning, tempted to side with Herbert Asquith and say that death has won as we leave Christ dying on the cross. But we know that is not the end of the story, we know that the

**Christ the King  
Year C  
Jeremiah 23:1-6  
Colossians 1:11-20  
Luke 23:33-43**

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Kingdom that Christ ushers in is one of life and hope and grace and truth.

Christ is the King, you and I are the kingdom builders.