

## Sermon for Sunday before Advent: “Christ The King or ‘Stir Up Sunday’?”



I always feel conflicted when we reach this last Sunday of the church' year.

Officially, we celebrate 'Christ The King' today: next week, we will begin Advent- a season of anticipation- and the readings change from Year C to Year A.

I suspect there is a touch of escapism here: church attendance usually plumbs the depths today, so a ride is hitched on the coat tails of the triumphant Christ.

Thus we end the year, as we began, looking steadfastly back at the achievements of Jesus.

In years gone by, today was known as 'Stir-Up Sunday', partly after the Common Prayer Book collect for the day, which begins "Stir up the wills of your people , O Lord, that they may might bring forth good works plenteously—". In Victorian times it also became the day when families stirred together the ingredients for the Christmas puddings. I don't know whether to laugh with the angels or cry with the current victims of humankind's selfishness, who the current blend of church ingredients seems so powerless to nourish. I have decided to ease my inner conflict by mixing the two themes, hence the image of a flaming Christmas that adorns today's service sheet.

In Luke's account of the last hour in Jesus' life (Ch23 v 33-43), He is about to die the same way as anyone else who dared to challenge those who had commandeered power. Alongside him were two men who had also challenged the domination system but for completely different reasons. They had probably tried to enrich themselves at the expense of the Roman Empire, which Jesus also wanted to rob - not for his own aggrandizement, but to transfer all power and wealth to the common man and woman. It was an outrageous aim and required every ounce of his compassion, will and strength but at its heart, his mission was as simple as A, B, C. Humankind thrived when they lived as brothers and sisters, as a single family, dedicated to uplift their neighbours. There was a way to do it and this was the way of the cross.

As we look back on Jesus' mighty triumph on the cross and sing our hymns of adulation and victory with the angels, let's not forget the 1000's of people who are in danger of freezing to death in Ukraine, starving to death in Mogadishu or who depend on UK foodbanks that are running short of food. As Year C ends and Year A begins, can the church honestly congratulate itself on a job well done? Is it sufficient to have defended the faith and kept its powerbase secure for another year, blind to the fact that the Jesus' vision for humanity has slipped yet further from reality?

Jesus gave us the perfect ingredients for a salvation pudding, yet we are still struggling to find a mix that delivers a satisfying end product. I have been reading Brian McLaren's latest book 'Do I Stay Christian? He ends it by answering his own question with a resounding 'Yes' and offers a new recipe, which drops some traditional ingredients and adds others. He stresses how young Christianity is by saying that if the history of our Universe was compressed into one year, Christianity would not appear until the last four seconds. In essence, he argues that Christianity is about Being rather than Believing: being as Christ- like as humanly possible rather than believing things about him, such as his whereabouts now, befitting kingly status. It's the difference between staring at the recipe and plunging the hands into a tacky pudding mix.

In my preparations, I came across a warning that my pudding picture blithely ignores. The flickering flames have ignited the sprig of holly, whose toxic ingredients are about fall onto the pudding and be consumed. I'm not sure that the advice to use artificial holly really gets round that problem! Brian McLaren goes so far as to declare some ingredients of the church's creeds and doctrines to be 'toxic theology', responsible for killing off interest in Christianity.

In plunging our hands into the pudding mix, we must locate ourselves in the real world as part of the created order, feeling its tensions and pains: as ice caps melt, rain forests are felled, soils are desertified and livestock are industrially processed. We could look closely and critically at our recipe, including the things we read, say and sing by way of worship: we have a very different creed to say this morning, one which involves less believing and being more like Christ.

'I believe in Jesus Christ-----

every day I am afraid that he died for nothing,  
because he is buried in our churches,  
because we have betrayed his revolution  
in obedience to and fear of the authorities.

I believe in Jesus Christ who resurrected into our life  
so that we shall be free  
from prejudice and presumptuousness, from fear and hate  
and push his revolution onward----

I believe---

in the possibility of meaningful life  
for all humankind.

(From CREDO by Dorothy Soelle)

We could read the bible more literarily and less literally. The fact that Jesus taught mostly in parables, in allegories rather than facts, allowing the hearer to mine the rich veins of truth for themselves can be our incentive: what was good enough for him should be good enough for us. Interestingly, it was common practice for rabbis to teach in parables and many of Jesus' contemporaries used parables involving a king as the

central character: Jesus never did. Reading the bible literarily and allowing for the probability that the gospel writers embellished the original words of Jesus in weaving a narrative around his memorized acts can enrich rather than betray his achievements. This may restrict some of the things we believe about Jesus, but it can enhance our determination to continue his transforming mission and overthrow the powers of self-interest.

With his dying breath, Christ the King, promises his penitent companion on a neighbouring cross that they will continue their journeys together, on course for a different world. That is our challenge when we celebrate the achievements of our unkingly King today. We may know our scriptural A B C backwards but if read the scriptures literarily, is it possible that when we get to November next year, we might look back on a year when we actually became more Christ-like?

**May the flame rekindle in our hearts and never flicker or cease to lighten the darkness around us.**

*Neville*