

Lord of time and space

a sermon preached on the

reign of Christ

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1: 15-23; Matthew 25: 31-46.

Christians across the world are keeping this last Sunday before the season of Advent as Christ the King Sunday. Really committed fans, across the world-well at least the English-speaking world remember at this time of the year the first screening of Dr. Who! Now I am not an avid Dr. Who fan but I have watched quite a few episodes with our children were young and more recently with our grandchildren. To my thinking this curiously British take on science fiction has something to say to us about the relationship between faith and life in all its dimensions.

Like Christianity itself, it is a wonder the program ever survived. Its first episode was overshadowed by the assassination of President John F. Kennedy the day before. A world jittery after the tension of the Cuban missile crisis was frankly too worried to notice a new feature in the TV schedule for Saturday in the early evening. A repeat transmission the next week was more successful in keeping the audience firmly planted on the lounge suite and then as the mythology has it, the arrival of the Daleks soon had them hiding behind the lounge!

What made Dr. Who a success then – and now – was the way in which it made our home planet appear tiny, indeed almost lost in the vastness of space and yet, at the same time, a prized objective. One thinks of those wonderful lines from H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* about 'intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarding this earth with envious eyes'. The human race is wonderful but fragile, somewhere between the earth and the stars. These contrasting perspectives of terrestrial and universal, grandeur and meanness go right to the heart of what is being celebrated in the Reign of Christ – the feast of Christ the King.

Most of us are used to being told that our religious sensibilities are the product of deeply embedded responses to the vastness of the cosmos compared with our own insignificance. Quite frankly I refuse to be sold such a limited explanation of our disposition to wonder. The limitless canvas of space, especially breathtaking on a spring night out in the bush, serves as an affirmation of the need not to be limited in our beholding. In the 'cosmic scheme' our length of life might be little better than a fruit fly, but the fact remains that we are still able to admire and desire to explore this expanse that envelopes us.

The opening lines of this Sunday's gospel reading seem to invite us to look upwards as 'the Son of Man comes in his glory escorted by all the angels' [Matthew 25.31]. One could imagine the disciples open mouthed and staring at this time in Jesus' ministry. What the eleven needed at this time was that little shove in order to move on and, just as crucially to look around them. Herein lies the paradox of the feast and the Christian life which it is meant to mirror: how do we remain aware of 'the end times' and yet value what we are being asked to do right this minute? Can we look for the cosmic Christ without forgetting that he also comes continually in the least of his brothers and sisters?

Mention of the 'cosmos' also addresses another fear which often compounds our sense of littleness: that life is random, meaningless and futile. Although this can, in exceptional people, bring about a dogged generosity of spirit, in most cases it results in a rather self-preoccupied attitude which asks: 'What's the point? Why bother?'

The Christian response is that Christ is the point. He is the fixed point from which order and love radiate throughout the universe-especially that bit of the universe which is my life. It is against this backdrop that the gospel's switch from the cosmic to the forensic makes sense. The quality of our lives and our discipleship are measurable by the standard of love and the extent to which we translate sentiment into action. The 'in so far' of Matthew's Last Judgment is equivalent to a Weights and Measures Act of the Kingdom. Christ the Judge shows us what love looks like: this profound pastoral activity takes up the themes of Ezekiel and the 23rd psalm. The deficiencies of those who refuse to show love or who fail to love are shown to be culpable. Of course we would be doing the gospel a disservice if we emphasise Christ' kingly prerogative as Judge to the detriment of our own capacity to choose and evaluate the worth of our own actions: the unexamined spiritual life is not worth living.

As one cycle of the Church's life begins to give way to another, I think it is the time to enter into the venerable practice to examine our conscience. The 'classic examination of conscience, with clear moral overtones, invites us to question ourselves and probe the accrued layers of truths, half-truths, downright lies and alibis. An examination of consciousness stresses our awareness of God and, by extension, the world and the people who inhabit it. One looks within; the other looks beyond ourselves. It seems to me that the ideal Christian life is one which keeps all these 'glances' upwards, outwards, inwards, in a fruitful balance and equilibrium.

Although we often experience the overshadowing effect of crises, both global and personal, our 'little lives' are part of a bigger story. Neither fear nor fatigue are the inevitable reactions to the incursion of those cosmic 'enemies' alluded to by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15.24. Our individual and collective history points towards a pattern of change and renewal. The power unleashed by the 'first fruits' of the Resurrection propels us into the future with confidence, 'radiant in the brightness of our King' as the Easter proclamation sings: Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!

Today's scriptures make an effective bridge to the first few weeks of Advent which follow. With Christ as Alpha and Omega, our lives take on new meaning and fresh purpose. We too are travellers in time and space, the continuum of his undying life and endless triumph.