

Christ the king

Texts: Jeremiah 23:1-6, Psalm 46, Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 22:33-43

Today is hogmanay.

No, I haven't got my dates mixed up. I know it is only November 24th. But today is the end of the year as far as the Church is concerned. Next Sunday, Advent Sunday, is the beginning of a new Church year, which makes today hogmanay Sunday.

While the last three Sundays have been called quite simply 'Fourth', 'Third' and 'Second' Sunday before Advent, today has a special official name: it is known as 'Christ the King'. On the last Sunday of the Christian year every year, we choose to remind ourselves that Christ is king. Not just king of God's own people, the king that Jeremiah looked forward to; not just king of the whole earth, as we sang about in our Psalm today; but, as the letter to the Colossians reminds us, king of the universe:

'in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers ... so that he might come to have first place in everything.'

No bigger claim can be made: 'in him *all things* ... were created ... so that he might ... have first place in *everything*.' But just in case you haven't got it, our author labours the point in three ways - 'in heaven and on earth ... visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers'. Got it? Christ is king of the shebang, without exception.

That is what the Church chooses to remind us of every year on hogmanay Sunday. But what does it mean for Christians to claim that 'Christ is king'? Our Colossians reading has an interesting answer to that question:

'In him all things hold together.'

In other words, Christ's kingship means that he is the 'glue of the universe'. It is because of Christ that 'everything hangs together'. Or, to put it negatively, without Christ as 'glue', everything falls apart. Both of our Old Testament passages today give us vivid images of such falling apart.

Jeremiah talks of the people of God as sheep being scattered by callous shepherds. Our Psalm likens nations rent asunder by wars to mountains shattered by violent earthquakes. Scattered sheep, shattered landscapes - that's what happens where the 'glue' goes missing. Colossians claims that Christ is the glue that reverses all of that - 'in him all things hold together'.

And what an absurd claim to make in the midst of a world in which everything seems falling apart. Let's just do a hogmanay review of 2013, which opened in January with the kidnapping and killing of nearly 40 oil workers in Algeria by arm gangs. April saw the Boston marathon bomb. In the same month, a poorly-constructed commercial building collapsed in Bangladesh, killing and injuring thousands. The UK news was dominated for months by the sex grooming scandal, while Scotland was rocked in recent weeks by the industrial unrest in Grangemouth threatening thousands of jobs.

'In him all things hold together'?! It seems preposterous to make such a claim in the midst of a world in which everything seems to be falling apart. Glue, what glue?!

'When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.'

A tableau of a shattered world - three executed prisoners in a landscape so bleak that it was called 'the Skull'. Two of them were being executed for the evil they had done. But their violent death could not undo whatever it was that they had done to shatter the lives of others. The third prisoner was condemned unjustly by jealousy and cowardice. Everyone mercilessly mocked him. They even put a sign on top of his cross proclaiming him 'King of the

Jews'. His close friends and associates scattered like frightened and confused sheep.

Yet, within a short time of this man's death, the very same friends and associates were proclaiming that the mocking sign got it right after all - he *was* king. How is that possible? How is this kingship exercised?

'Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." '

The exercise of this kingship is as simple as that, but as profound as that; as weak as that, but as strong as that; strong enough to bring about an immediate effect. One of the criminals was not mocking; instead, he said,

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

One fractured life was immediately transformed, as Jesus himself acknowledged:

'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'

But this transformation of a pathetic, dying criminal seems destined to have little effect - it passed everyone else by; they continued to mock Jesus, because all they saw was weakness and failure. Well, not quite everybody. One of the soldiers who were mocking Jesus was their leader, a Roman centurion. Luke tells us in the next verses that we didn't read out that this soldier saw different:

'When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was righteous." '

Another transformation has begun. The work of gluing everything back together in our tableau of human suffering has been well and truly inaugurated, by a king whose was content to be publicly pushed out onto the margins, indeed to the extreme margin of death on a cross.

This is the king whose kingship the Church celebrates today. Colossians reminds us that we are all citizens of this kingdom where Christ reigns as king from a cross:

‘[God] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son ... by making peace through the blood of his cross.’

Notice it doesn’t say ‘rescued us from darkness’. No, the world of that criminal and that centurion remained dark, as dark as our earlier review of 2013 seemed. But invisibly, the grip of that darkness on the criminal and the centurion has been loosened. They have emigrated into another kingdom.

Luke goes on to write another book to tell us about those many thousands of men and women who were soon to follow the criminal and the centurion to emigrate into this new kingdom, the story of the Church in the Acts of the Apostles. This new Church was not so much an organisation as an organism animated by Christ. Colossians again:

‘He is the head of the body, the church.’

All of us in the Church are called to *embody* our citizenship in this new kingdom. Or, to put it another way, we are committed to becoming practitioners of the new world order inaugurated by Christ the king on the cross.

To see what that may mean for us here today, let me take you back to the church founded by Saint Paul in Corinth, where things were decidedly *not* holding together. They argued about communion, to the extent that different factions sometimes celebrate Eucharist separately. They couldn’t agree on the language to use at their acts of worship. Some valued esoteric speech that few others could understand, known as ‘speaking in tongues’. Others argued that speaking in plain, everyday language was to be preferred, so that this ‘speaking in tongues’ business should just be banned. The end

result was, in Paul's words, 'disorder'. The disorder spread to other areas. They had long promised to collect money for a charitable cause in Jerusalem, but so far had not delivered a single penny. In case you think I've made all that up, you can check it out yourself in 1 and 2 Corinthians. Things are falling apart in Corinth.

Why were things falling apart? Paul's diagnosis was that they had forgotten about Christ, the king on the cross. It is true, Paul tells them, that in Christ, we each have the freedom to worship whichever way we want - none of it matters in principle to God, because God does not care about external formalities. But, in Christ, we are committed to putting the good of the whole body before personal preference and agenda.

Paul's prescription for dealing with the disorder in the body of Christ at Corinth can be summed up by borrowing a turn of phrase from John F Kennedy's inaugural address, 'Ask not what the Body can do for you, but what you can do for the Body.' Not saying to each other, 'we must do this', or 'we can't do that', but 'how may I best help *us* worship God all together as one body in this place, even if my agenda has to be pushed to the margins?'

Dare we do that? Dare we decide that such costly citizenship will be at the heart of the 5-year plan that the bishop is asking us to make? Hogmanay Sunday is a good time to make a decision.

From heaven you came helpless babe
Entered our world, your glory veiled
Not to be served but to serve
And give Your life that we might live

So let us learn how to serve
And in our lives enthrone Him
Each other's needs to prefer
For it is Christ we're serving

Amen.