

Sermon preached by Revd Rachel McDougall

St Paul's Canterbury

The Reign of Christ/Christ the King A

Sunday 22 November 2020

When was it?

*The Reign of Christ: The hidden one found in the vulnerable &
in mercy*

Today's reading looks to the future reign of God coming in full. We see a picture of the Son of Man, of Jesus in the future in his full glory.

We catch a glimpse of what is still a mystery, hidden in the future.

Yet in this story the Son of Man in glory, the reigning one is also the hidden one, hidden in rags and need, in the stranger and hungry, the thirsty and naked and those in prison.

The triumphant one is also the hidden one, present and seen in the most vulnerable.

The vision of a glorious powerful reign is also a reign from the hidden throne of the vulnerable and powerless.

Jesus chooses to identify himself with the least and waits for us to notice and respond.

You could say that Jesus throughout his life was sought out by the least and most vulnerable but also experienced this himself.

We do not find the Christ looking up into the heavens, or looking up to power or status or triumph.

Instead we are invited to look around, to look beyond, to look below.

Both the sheep and the goats ask when was it?

Neither group recognise Jesus' hidden reign amongst the vulnerable.

When was it that we saw you sick, or hungry, or a prisoner?

The sheep are praised for what they did for the least.

The key to the story is Jesus identifying himself with the vulnerable and the call to respond with compassion and love that is so fully lived into that we are able to respond without even thinking or realising what they have done.

One surprise is the presence of the hidden one, the other is the response required is not grand gestures, or heroic deeds.

It is not confessing our faith in the right way but by being kind.

This is the criterion – to respond lovingly with the love we have already received, already seen in vulnerable love on a cross.

How we care matters.

All are made in the divine image, and are to be respected as such.

We are not to divide people into sheep and goats as the deserving and undeserving, but see each one as Christ – even though the image might be hidden or marred.

The king is not found in the powerful, in the movers and the shakers.

The king is a hidden king – hidden beneath rags and the flesh of his poor on earth.

The royalty of Jesus is homeless Jesus, sick Jesus, imprisoned Jesus, hungry Jesus – it is a royalty that stoops.

A powerful image that helps illustrate this is the sculpture of Jesus as a homeless man sleeping on a park bench – his face is hidden beneath the folds of the cloak, his feet bear the wounds of the cross.

It is a visual reminder of the crucified and risen one present within the vulnerable – the vulnerable part of ourselves and the vulnerability we see in others.

We may not know how to respond to the vulnerable.

We are good at hiding our own vulnerability under many layers and find it hard to reveal it to God let alone anyone else.

No wonder we often find it hard what to do in the face of others' vulnerability, however it is revealed in nakedness, hunger or thirst.

The hope of the Christian message is that Jesus sees and knows our vulnerability and the vulnerability of the least and is there.

We are called to be willing to see others as Christ does, with eyes of kindness and hearts full of compassionate love and mercy.

As Fleming Rutledge says: to show mercy is about being willing to enter into the chaos of others and be present.

Our role is not to judge others, our call is to love.

It is God alone who knows and sees what is hidden in each of our hearts and sees us for who we are.

Our call is first to be present and to act with kindness and mercy in whatever way we can.

We will not always get it right, we will often fail.

There are times when we fail from fear, or distraction, or the awkwardness of not knowing what to do.

What matters is that we pray and that we try, that we love.

A boy told his mother about his friend who was sitting outside on the fence crying.

He said I just went and sat with him while he cried.

To finish Malcolm Guite's poem:

*Our King is calling from the hungry furrows
Whilst we are cruising through the aisles of plenty,
Our hoardings screen us from the man of sorrows,
Our soundtracks drown his murmur: 'I am thirsty'.
He stands in line to sign in as a stranger
And seek a welcome from the world he made,
We see him only as a threat, a danger,
He asks for clothes, we strip-search him instead.*

*And if he should fall sick then we take care
That he does not infect our private health,
We lock him in the prisons of our fear
Lest he unlock the prison of our wealth.
But still on Sunday we shall stand and sing
The praises of our hidden Lord and King.*