Sermon for Christ the King 2021 – 9am St Godwald’s

Today’s Festival of Christ King marks the end of the church’s liturgical year.

Our journey through the entire story of God’s relationship with His world, a story in which God makes repeated attempts to call the people of Israel back to their destiny, a story that culminates in the gifts first of Jesus and then of the Holy Spirit, this story reaches its liturgical climax in a celebration of God’s sovereignty over this world and the world to come: a celebration of the Kingdom of God.

If I had more time, I would be making my Christmas puddings today, for today is also known, of course, as Stir Up Sunday. In the past I’ve even been known to bring my mix into church so everyone can have a stir.

Today’s readings feel a very long way away from the innocent joy of the birth of a child in a stable. Here we have very mature, if contrasting, images of divine Kingship.

In Daniel we are presented with a very traditional vision of God: old, patriarchal, all powerful, judgemental. Turning to John, the image of God could not be more different: discursive, philosophical, personally challenging, counter cultural even.

The images of God in scripture are numerous and diverse and one of our challenges as Christians is reconciling these different presentations of the divine and deciding which kind of God it is that we believe in.

Few are able to maintain an honest consistency in their understanding of God. When horrible things happen to people in this age, even the most mellow of us struggle to resist the desire to believe in a medieval all-powerful God capable of sweeping into eternal hell those whose actions are vile and perverse.

Faced with a committed agnostic or atheist I am fond of using the phrase: I don’t believe in the God you don’t believe in. In other words, if we are to have an honest conversation about the nature of divinity, then we need to agree on a common starting point for our explorations. It sometimes seems to me that some people who are unwilling to contemplate the possibility of God defend their view by projecting upon the faithful an image of God to which no serious Christian would assent.

If we are to counter the old images of a ruthless God impermeable to the sufferings of others, we need to point people towards the evidence that supports our vision of a merciful, loving God.

That evidence is a great deal stronger than we sometimes think or articulate. And it begins, of course, with this biblical truth: God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son…

If that very familiar theological idea feels a little remote, the concept at its heart has been played out for real repeatedly throughout history. There is one very famous example which you may already know as it has been re-created for film. It is the story of a railway bridge operator, John Griffith, who found himself in the deeply unenviable position of having to choose between the safety of a train load of passengers, and his son, who had fallen into the gear mechanism of the bridge. He literally had to choose between sacrificing his son by lowering the bridge, or saving his son by sending a train with 400 passengers plunging down a ravine. He chose to sacrifice his son, a decision that tore him apart as he watched the smiling, ordinary, innocent and quite unaware lives of the passengers, speed past.

Those kinds of heart rending stories bring into sharp focus the kind of God I believe in: a God who is present in the daily struggles and impossible compromises of life; a God who is all-giving but also all-feeling; a God who needs us to be ready to live sacrificial lives but also a God who is prepared to be ignored by the very people who are being saved; a God who believes in the big picture, the long view, the possibilities of tomorrow, even if that means a heavier burden for one to bear today.

This kind of God is the kind of God to which I can give allegiance and declare with Thomas, my Lord and my God. This is the kind of God for today as we celebrate Christ the King and stir our puddings in readiness to celebrate his birth, despite the poverty of the world’s understanding and commitment to His Kingdom. This is the kind of God I recognise at work amongst us in our parish and in the wider church of our deanery, diocese and nation.

At every funeral I take, I repeat the scripture that I often use at the peace: *God is love and those who live in love, live in God and God lives in them.*

At times when faith in God is a struggle, I encourage people to remember their faith in love – for if God and love are synonymous, then love is the gatekeeper to our understanding of the divine. Our experience of love gives us a glimpse of the divine, insight into God’s working, evidence of God’s presence.

And as all – even the most damaged – can be led gently to believe in love, all too can come to believe in the divine. The King of Love my Shepherd is, to quote Henry Baker’s immortal take on Psalm 23.

As we wend our way towards Advent next week, may we each spend some time reflecting on the God in which we believe and pray that our understanding of Him will be deepened and broadened in the new church year that lies ahead.

Amen.