

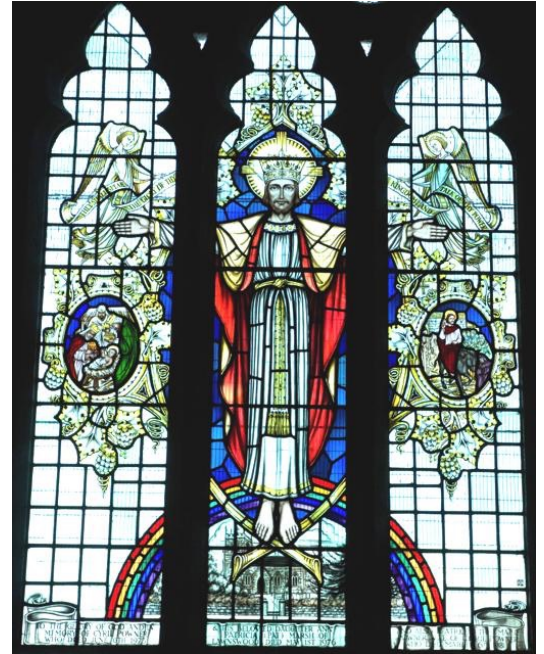
Sermon for Christ the King (Sunday 22nd November 2015) - *Mike Fox*

Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 Judgement before the Ancient One

Revelation 1:4b-8 John to the seven churches that are in Asia

John 18:33b-37 Jesus before Pilate

Today, we come to the end of the Church's Year. We map the whole of existence on to a single year to help us think about all aspects of our faith and define it a little bit more clearly; an appropriate focus for today's thinking is God's Kingdom and how it affects us now and in eternity. In the church's year, we think a little about the time before Christ during Advent, the first season of the calendar, and then in rapid succession his birth, his life among us, his death, his resurrection and his ascension. After he has left us at his ascension with his disciples staring blankly into space wondering what to do next, we recall the coming of the Holy Spirit among us so that we can be inspired as he was, and as his disciples were, to continue his work on earth. So begins the long season of ordinary time until we come finally to the festival of Christ the King, anticipating the second coming of Jesus to usher in his kingdom at the end of time. But, before that, we follow his path and the path of his disciples as we pray daily: "*... thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*" Our main focus then is on the growth of his kingdom here, yet we do perhaps need to lift our gaze briefly to contemplate Christ coming again as Judge and King, bringing with him his perfect kingdom in the end days, and giving us a vision of the future.



You may feel that the end days are a long way off, but there are some among us, perhaps we feel to be misguided, who seem to be saying that they can short-circuit the natural process by putting on a suicide vest, going into a busy place and detonating themselves so that they can get there first. I speak of the so-called Islamic State terrorists and all that they seek to tell us ... except of course, they've got it the wrong way round. If they were seeking to take us with them to the place we call heaven, they would present their arguments first instead of leaving some other members of the gang to claim responsibility for their actions after the event. No! they are doing no more than seeking to terrorize us by keeping their plans quiet. And, of course, it is an entirely selfish action trying to get there themselves without much thought about improving life here – is that what they do?



In a telling "Thought for the day" last Thursday on Radio 4, Mona Siddiqui told of her fears, and that of many faithful Muslims, that the violence and extreme militancy that we see in the name of Islam has at its core an ideology where dying is more important than living. "God is the greatest" may be a call to prayer, but it has also, she said, become a prelude to a death cult – we hear repeatedly, and quite correctly, that ordinary, faithful Muslims are baffled by these global events and that their faith remains a source of moral and spiritual growth, of

giving and generosity. But the tragic bombings and shootings over the last few weeks on the Russian plane, in Paris, in Mali, in Beirut (gosh! it's hard to keep up) show that unless we are active in defending all that is good in our faith, Mona Siddiqui continued, there will be no faith left to defend. With each attack, Islamism won't weaken their opponents, but it will hollow out the Muslim faith that little bit more, at least in the eyes of the world. I guess that most of us would consider that the Christian Crusades in the Middle Ages are similar, serious blemishes on our tradition, whereas our aim should be to build up God's kingdom here on earth, not to enforce it with arms but by spreading grace and love. Things have a habit of turning inside out when exposed to the way of Jesus.

Also on Thursday, we held our weekly fruitfulness meeting here in church and we were thinking about the possibilities of sharing our approach to life through prayer, but not in the formal way that comes into our worship day by day. We were wondering about other forms of sharing the spirit with others who might not be of the same tradition; we came up with the insight that there is a sense of trinity in all that we do when we are with others. Wherever we are, we can be mindful of being ourselves, but when we are in company, we can also be mindful of the other and we often find it helpful to engage with the other in terms that they understand. We find that out by listening and having empathy with their condition, the things that are bothering or concerning them, the things that hurt or make them suffer as well as the things that make them joyful and happy; we can share with all that they offer. But we can also share in things that are left unsaid or unexpressed; we do this through the attention of the spiritual essence of life that flows between us. It can take a myriad of forms and we may say that it is the Holy Spirit ministering to our needs, but we may also need to be respectful of the other and of the way it seems to them. If we can do that, we will be blessed and enriched through our sharing – Matthew expresses this very clearly when he writes: *“where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”* If I were quoting this for someone of another faith, I would simply say that “in my name” refers to this spiritual essence that we sense is with us, closer to us than breathing, as we engage with life in all its fullness.



William Strutt - "Peace" (1896)

Another reading during Morning Prayer last week came from the prophet Isaiah in chapter 11 and talked about the peaceful kingdom where: *“the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together ... the nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”* [Isaiah 11:6-9]. It's certainly hard to imagine this happening when there is

so much terror around us, but no doubt the new Jerusalem will live up to this description.

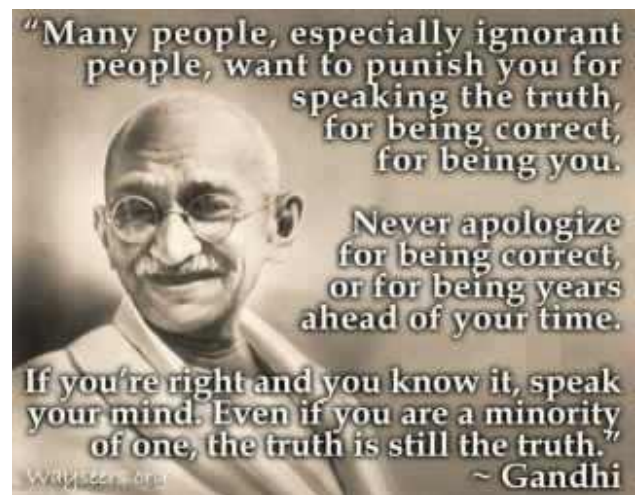


William Blake's Ancient of Days

What else do our readings for today have for us? Our reading from the book of Daniel speaks of the Ancient One taking his place on the throne at the end of time. The Ancient One is a title used in time gone by as the “father of the gods.” His hair was as white as snow; well, it would be if he’s been around since the beginning of time! He is this essence of life, of all that is – I suppose you could argue that he had no right to have any hair at all at his great age, but you could also argue that, since he is still full of life, he has every right to have a good head of hair. The throne was of fiery flames, reminiscent of the burning bush that confronted Moses [*Exodus 3*], a purifying fire that does not consume. There are thousands of thousands serving him, countless beyond number and the day of judgement has arrived, with the book containing the whole history of life, and of the part that we have played within it, being opened as we watch; this is Daniel’s vision of the judgement that will come to all of us.

Some of his visions are reflected in the description of the end times in the book of John’s revelation – there’s another statement there of what Jesus went through on our behalf. His incarnation demonstrated that he truly loves us, enough to go through the agony of the cross and that complete separation from his Father before he broke through to eternal life three days later. But, it is good to read that his life invites us to make up a faithful kingdom, serving our God and Father and following his example. We are to be a priesthood of all believers, ministering to those around us and to those we meet in all their need, as we are inspired to do. It is in satisfying the common good in and through his inspiration that we become one of the subjects in his kingdom.

In our gospel reading for today, we hear about Pilate quizzing Jesus and trying to discover who he really is; he is seeking to fathom the unfathomable, and he starts with things he has a chance of understanding, the working of a kingdom. But Pilate’s view is coloured by his experience of seeing how this world works; when Jesus responds that his kingdom is not of this world, this is when it all begins to unravel for Pilate. Jesus says that he has come to testify to the truth, the truth that will set us free [of all earthly constraints]. For some reason, we don’t have the following verse which simply says: “*Pilate asked him, ‘What is truth?’*” [*John 18:38*]. There is no answer given, either recorded by Jesus or by John, the author of the gospel; it is left for us, the reader, to explore and it is something which, I guess, we are all seeking because it gives us the means for making the most of life here; one of the keys to that is to rely on the Spirit to give us the instruction that we need ...



... in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, **AMEN**