

JESUS CHRIST: KING OF UNITY, KING OF PEACE

Christ the King, Trinity 25, C Luke 23. 33-43

Introduction

We had a deanery clergy meeting last Thursday. The topic that dominates the discussions in most of the recent deanery clergy meetings is the problem of economic restraints that puts in jeopardy the future of some of the parishes in the deanery. The point of the discussions is to see if parishes can be viable, growing and self-reliant financially in the long run. This problem touches us and our church as well and Avis, our PCC Treasurer, will speak to us later on in the service. She will inform us how our responsible stewardship can help God's work in our parish.

What I am going to say initially is connected with the feast of Christ the King. But, before we reflect on the challenges the word of God places before us, I would like that we look at our present state as a Church.

I am here only about 7 months and should be the last to make a statement but I have come to know our Church rather well where we are today and how we came here. If we make a graph of the last 40 years of our Church, it is very clear that we have not only not grown; in fact we are going down-hill and that fast.

Just like you need a doctor to tell you of the state of your health; you need someone from outside to tell you honestly the state of our health as a Church. True, I am no longer an outsider and so whatever I tell you this morning, I would like to do it more as a spiritual father who speaks to his spiritual children than just as a vicar; I would like to speak to you as someone who really loves you, cares for you and prays for you as individuals and as a body.

The hard pill that we may find it difficult to swallow is that if we don't correct our downward spiral, if we don't pray for a real spiritual revival, if we don't think outside the box we may not be able to avoid the inevitable – closure. *We must, therefore, all together, do all we can, in utter commitment to the Lord and trust in his promises and think and act differently, decisively and creatively.*

Let us take the example of the VBC. We can learn something from it. Whenever you pass by it, there is almost always something going on. It is a typical, modern church attractive to young people and families with all the proper facilities that is needed for being a church for today. We are hundred years old as a church and we will celebrate the centenary next year but we have to adapt for today's needs because we do not wish to become just a beautiful irrelevance on Willingdon Road. *But we love our church and we can, and we must, trust God and do all we can to make it a church relevant for today for today's families.*

I sometimes wonder if the re-ordering that has been done here in the past has really been done to maximise the use of the spaces in this church. Looking at our numbers,

I sometimes wonder, amusingly it might appear, if the high altar and chancel area would be sufficient for our normal use for worship and the rest of the space could be creatively used for other Kingdom purposes, always for the Lord. I wonder if the way we have re-ordered the church in the past has really attracted more people to come to our church. And if not, I wonder why! These are only questions I put to myself and which I share with you all.

Three areas for our attention

There are three areas that are very much on my heart which I feel, we must immediately seek to redress and improve so as to make our Church more attractive for outsiders, especially young families for today on a daily basis.

1. We must, as soon as possible, use the space under the tower in a more creative way, possibly as an office/reception/storage/archives/meeting room area, etc. This will help us to open the church on a daily basis if needed and offer the church for various uses to reach out to our people. *This would be a great way of witnessing to the Kingdom of God!*
2. We must, as soon as possible, create a large parking area in the south side of our church, re-locating the minibus area and thus providing space for a minimum of 50 cars at a time. This means the area where the former church hall stood could also be usefully utilised rather than remain unused for the Kingdom. 100 years ago, a parking area was unnecessary because there were no cars. Today people, especially young people, see if a church has parking facilities (cf. VBC) which are safe for children and the elderly. If not, they drive on to the nearest next church where such facilities are available. We can't blame them, can we? We have already lost many in this way but we must arrest the trend.
3. We must also see, as a Church, how we can maximise the use of the land we have around the Faith Hut as well. We are living in very tough times and we must make courageous and tough decisions if we want to carry on *being a Church for our children and grand children for the next 100 years* lest we are relegated, and we don't want that really, to being just a piece of monument one day!

The Word of God challenges us Today !

The Word of God for today is equally, if not more, challenging us as to how and why Jesus makes sense for us today as he did 2000 years ago. Cultures change, traditions change, buildings change, our ways of life change, but "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever" (Hebrews 12.8). The only criterion we ought to have when we make necessary changes to structures is that it must serve Christ and His Kingdom and His Good News of Salvation and Hope for us all!

The two themes that stand out in the gospel this morning are found in Luke chapter 23 verses 34 as well as in verses 42 and 43. Basically, the underlying theme is as given in the leaflets – Jesus Christ, King of Unity and King of Peace.

Jesus is a King who forgives!

I think the particular theme that stands out and that relates to our situation is the theme of forgiveness. Jesus says in verse 34: "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do!"

Forgiveness, especially forgiveness of enemies, is a major theme of Jesus' teachings. On the cross, Jesus himself gives us the ultimate example of forgiveness by praying for and forgiving those who had crucified him to the cross.

In this way, Jesus has absolutised the importance of forgiveness for his disciples as he also teaches in the "The Lord's Prayer": "Father, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." (cf. Matthew 6.12; Luke 11.4)

Why do I say, the theme of forgiveness relates particularly to us as a Church?

Although one lately arrived, I have slowly come to know that things have happened in our church over the years. The Body of Christ, that is what we are, seems to have been wounded in one way or another. I need not go into unnecessary details, you all know these things more than me.

Well, we have only ONE way of dealing with it and going forward. And Jesus shows us the way. We must, first of all, admit that we *are* a wounded fellowship and we *have* wounded our fellowship. We must admit that some of our brothers and sisters who are not with us today should make us reflect whether we have failed as true disciples of Christ. Disunity in the Body of Christ is a scandal for the world for we can never make a difference in the world or in our neighbourhood unless we are a united and loving fellowship as a Body of Christ. You might say, that is not my fault, it's their business. Let them go where they want. No. We can't say that. They belonged to our Church family and if they are not with us today because of our lack of love, we are a broken family and we must be reconciled so that we can all move on, but before that *we need healing as a Church and we must forgive those who hurt us and seek forgiveness from those we have hurt.*

Jesus is a real King who saves and welcomes us into 'Paradise'

The second challenge that Jesus gives to us is that Jesus is a king who dies for his people and he is a king who can dispense the pardon and mercy which only a king can. We read in verse 42: "Then he said, 'Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.' " Only in the name of Jesus is there salvation (cf Acts 4.12). This is a frequent theme of the evangelist Luke.

Jesus' kingly rule is begun by his death and resurrection. The criminal has deep faith that the dying Jesus is truly a king and can dispense the pardon and mercy which only a king can.

In verse 43, we read: "Jesus replied, 'truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'"

Jesus who will experience God's victory over death, declares the repentant criminal free from sin. "It is the acquittal uttered by him who is 'the one ordained by God; to be the judge of the living and the dead.'" (cf. Acts 10.42)

The rich image of 'paradise' encompasses the return to original creation, the eating of the fruit of the tree of life and the fellowship with the righteous. The gates of paradise have been reopened by the obedience and faith of the New Adam who also opens the kingdom to sinners.

"There is, perhaps, irony here in that the religious authorities lead the cries of Jesus' death, whereas the one person in the text who perceives the truth and dares to speak it is the second criminal being crucified alongside Jesus (23. 40-43). He acknowledges that he justly deserves his punishment, in contrast to Jesus, who is innocent. Furthermore, he sees that Jesus will enter his kingly realm not by coming down from the cross, but by dying. His request, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom' (verse 42), is a plea not to be forgotten. Yet it is also a confession of faith and an indication that he has understood the mystery of the gospel – that mocking, insults, flogging and crucifixion are necessary to the prophetic plan that leads to resurrection (18. 31-34). While other actors in the drama suppose that Jesus' fortunes are coming to an end (albeit for some a tragic end), the second criminal perceives that God will vindicate the King and will bring him into his proper rule." (ASC, 288)

There has been discussion about the words of Jesus forgiving his enemies. The reaction of the two criminals to these words of Jesus pardoning his crucified is utterly significant. "One criminal 'kept deriding him' and joined the group of scoffers. But the other criminal hears in the words something more and different – the words of a King, whose authority is like no other, who prays for those who spitefully abuse and persecute him. He seeks a place for himself in a realm where the keynote is pardon and not recompense, where condemned criminals can be fully restored." (*ibidem*)

We must move on!

During the season of Advent, we will reflect on the theme of forgiveness and reconciliation and at a proper time it would be nice that we have a prayer service followed by a feast of reconciliation and forgiveness, a time to make peace with those we might have hurt or those who might have hurt us and move on as a healed and reconciled Church – instead of unwittingly hiding the dirt under the carpet or letting the wounds fester and hamper our growth as a Church. *But in Jesus who died for us and who loves and forgives us, we have all the answers for all our problems. He is the King of Unity and the King of Peace! "All things work together unto good for those who love him." (Rom 8.28)*

Father Sebastian
21st November 2010