

Advent Sunday is the start of the church year, a time for new beginnings and of the penitential, preparatory period that leads up to Christmas. Christmas has arrived in the shops already, of course, and it is probably already under way for those of us who are responsible for cards, presents, invitations, catering and festivities. It can seem like a long, hard slog in lots of ways. Don't worry. I haven't lost the plot. I do know that today isn't Advent Sunday. But Father Michael got in first with the apocalyptic sermon last week, and I won't be here next week.

The old name for this Sunday was 'Stir-up Sunday', which came from the collect for the day, which began: 'Stir up, we beseech thee, the wills of thy faithful people'. Having, one hopes, had their wills stirred up, the faithful housewives went home and stirred up their Christmas puddings. My mother and grandma always did, and everyone had to have a stir and make a wish. I remember the pudding mixture being tremendously thick and heavy, and just as hard to stir up as the wills of many people. The Christmas pudding wish was for something in the future. But as this Sunday is the end of the church year, before making the wish – starting the project – for next year it makes sense to have a look at how we got on in the year that is just finishing.

It's been our 125th anniversary year and we've had some splendid celebrations. It was wonderful to have our splendid new bishop here. The miraculous draught of fishes is still at the back of the church to remind us. It provoked a raised episcopal eyebrow when Bishop Sarah was told that she could cense it but couldn't sprinkle it with holy water because some of the fish weren't waterproof. We've run the Night Shelter and supported the Foodbank. The Ivy Café is clearly meeting a need. Pebbles continues to grow, and Stepping Stones has made a good start. (I'll spare you the geological lecture about how stones gradually get eroded into pebbles.) We're a lively, friendly community and it looks as though we're gradually getting our finances in better shape. Father David had sufficient confidence in us to take a three-month sabbatical, and Father Michael has led us smoothly and seamlessly while David has been away. It's all pretty good. It would be wonderful if there were more of us, but we do a good job with what we've got. I'm almost inclined to use that horrible phrase: 'Give yourselves a big hand!'

But there is another sort of year-end review, and the designation of this Sunday as the feast of Christ the King gives us some pointers as to how to go about it. 'King' and 'Lord' are words we don't often use in daily life. A king is a man who sits on a throne with a crown on his head – ask any five-year-old. A king has power, and uses it. He has subjects who are obedient and humble. He's not concerned with other people's opinions. He makes decisions, gives orders and expects action. He can be cruel and ruthless or just and merciful – it's up to him. This isn't the twenty-first century way of doing things. Kings don't run consultations, hold elections, listen to parliaments, respond to complaints or make restitution to people who have suffered from their actions. Yet, if we are here, taking part in worship, we are accepting and welcoming Jesus as our king. How on earth (and, hopefully, later on in heaven) can we do this?

Our Gospel reading gives the clue. Pilate confronts Jesus, who stands before him with no crown, no courtiers, no weapons, no army and no pedigree. He has been captured without a struggle. The Jewish leaders claim that he is a blasphemer and a terrible danger to the rule of law. Pilate is genuinely confused. He asks: 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answers: 'My kingdom is not of this world.' And there it is. This is the secret, the key. Just as Jesus has turned other beliefs and customs upside-down – his teaching in the Beatitudes, eating with tax-collectors, touching the unclean, treating women as the equals of men, putting human need above religious dogma – so he has also turned kingship upside-down. His kingdom is beyond

anything that Pilate can understand. 'I have come to testify to the truth', says Jesus, and Pilate asks: 'What is truth?'

Jesus is indeed a king. He has power and authority, which he uses to challenge harsh laws, unjust rulers and unthinking religion. His weapons are words, and his army is the citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven – everyone who listens to his voice and belongs to the truth. No immigration restrictions, no tariffs, no trades. Everyone is welcome to come into the kingdom and testify to the truth. His laws are simple: love God, your neighbour and yourself. Do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God.

What is truth? The truth of the Gospel, of course. The truth of Jesus as saviour and God as merciful Lord. But we have to go further. Pilate's question is more relevant now than it has ever been. 'When I use a *word*,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it *means* just what I choose it to *mean*—neither more nor less. That was fiction – *Alice Through the Looking-glass*. Today everyone has their own truth, and we are endlessly bombarded with conflicting messages. 'Spin', which started out as the presentation of a fact in the most favourable light, has turned into outright distortion and lying. It's hard to know who or what to trust, so people become cynical, trusting nothing and no-one. Each person constructs a narrative that fits their personal prejudices and preconceptions, and if anyone argues, disputes their 'facts', or presents a different view, they are offensive and must be shut down and shut out.

Jesus's weapons were words. We have words too, and can choose to use them to reinforce the Kingdom. We have daily opportunities to talk about truth and justice, to expose lies and foster compassion. It's only timidity and fear of the consequences that stop us. Jesus promised that when we need words we will be given them. Speak up for someone, and strike a blow for the Kingdom. Investigate something, use the knowledge to write or speak about what is truly happening, and bring light into darkness. Evaluate what you hear and read in the light of the motives of the people and organisations who have produced it, and testify to the truth.

'Sir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people.' We need to be shaken and stirred: shaken by what we see around us and stirred to take action. That is the way to become lively soldiers and servants of truth, worthy citizens of the Kingdom of heaven and subjects of Christ the King.