

Sermon for Christ the King Sunday 22nd November 2015

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Many of you will know that we have just begun a Pilgrim course here at St Peter's. As the name suggests, it is a course that aims to take us further on and further in on our Christian journey. Pilgrim begins by looking at the responses made at baptism. It questions, for example, what turning to Christ might actually mean. It questions, or rather allows us to ponder, what we mean when we talk about Christ. Who Jesus was *and* who Jesus is for us today.

If I were to ask you now to describe Jesus to me, I think some common strands of description would emerge. His beard for example and perhaps the kind of clothes he wore. But for each of us a particular image, hazy perhaps, is how we picture him. In almost all cases it would have been formed when we were very young. I had a picture of Jesus in my room as a child with him shown with very fair skin, auburn hair and blue eyes. All my years of reading and studying Jesus in his first century Jewish, dark-haired, dark-eyed and olive-skinned context still has not shaken my early and now default picture of Jesus as a Celt.

If this is true for Jesus, whom we can place in a distinct time and race, then it is all the more the case for God, the Father, the Almighty. Just those words Father and Almighty conjure two powerful pictures of God. And again these are fixed very early in our lives. But in this case many of these pictures in our heads are derived from the scriptures themselves. And these word pictures in the Bible have informed and drawn what artists, writers and thinkers have represented. The pictures, stories and ideas that are in our heads this morning.

Our readings today are prime examples of this process as they focus on Christ's majesty: Christ the King. In our first reading from the Book of Daniel, the writer has received visions and prophecies of the times to come. He sees God himself. In our version of the Bible we heard him described as "an Ancient One". The older translation is the wonderful "Ancient of Days". With his glowing white clothes and hair he sits in judgment on his fiery throne with its wheels of fire. This is what the poet William Blake imagined in his poem "Jerusalem" as a chariot of fire. It is what the hymn writer saw as he wrote "Immortal, invisible God only wise" with its following lines "Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days, /Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise."

Later in this same reading we have the beautiful picture of one "like the son of man", or "like a human being" as we have in our rather clunky rendering, "coming with the clouds of heaven". This is traditionally seen as Christ coming in majesty as king of the whole world. Soon we shall sing Wesley's lovely Advent hymn "Lo, he comes with clouds descending" and shall remember –consciously or more likely unconsciously - Daniel's vision, and indeed St John the Divine's vision, given to us in the Book of Revelation, our second reading today. These are impressive in the whole sense of that word. They press themselves into us and into our imaginations.

These images make for beautiful poetry but they can make for more difficult relationships between us and the God who made and loved us. The figure of God of power and might is hard to reconcile with the Jesus in our Gospel today – standing before Pilate, about to be crucified.

These images can also knock against experiences in our own lives. The word “father” may be a word of warmth, comfort, trust and love to one person. It may be a word of absence, coldness, fear or pain to another person. Invoking the Fatherhood of God as his prime attribute may make the journey to faith a very difficult path indeed. Yet to the person for whom the word Father holds such pain, there is also the deeper truth that God *is* for us the father that no human father however loving can ever be. Breaking through the words and the pictures to find – to recognise – what Pilate asked but could not see – the truth.

Breaking through. Recognising. Noticing. We can be frightened of this, as though looking at our faith too closely will be like peeling back the layers of an onion. We fear what we might be left with, or left without. A version of a story in the Jewish Rabbinic tradition about this can be helpful: A man is given a vase which he is told is priceless. He puts it on a high shelf and never touches it. One day an important merchant comes to the house and asks why he has put such a worthless object on display. Embarrassed and angry the man snatches at the vase to throw it away, when it breaks revealing a huge and perfect diamond. He would never have known the true treasure he possessed if he had not broken through what was hiding it.

Our faith can be like this. Valued but not explored. The full richness of life in Christ kept at bay, on the high shelf of Sunday. Of course we don't always need to be so dramatic and break old ideas and pictures. We may just need to dust them off a bit and look at them a bit more closely. Notice what we have perhaps not noticed before and have taken for granted. Those old Sunday school pictures were lovely but have they kept my relationship with God stuck in the past. What is he saying to me now? Dare to look at the pictures in our heads and ask any questions that occur to us, but before we do place in God's hands our looking and our asking. For it is the one who is truth who is prompting us to know him better and to let him reveal more and more of who he is to us. Not a picture on a wall or in a book or in our heads but at work in us today.

Amen