Sunday 25 November 2007: Christ the King

Readings: Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 23: 33-43

The Being of Trees

‘The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.’

‘Trees are sanctuaries – whoever knows how to listen to them, can learn the truth’ wrote Hermann Hesse.

An elderly and wise nun of much experience, reflecting on her life, tells of her relationship with trees. She says ‘I want to talk about “talking to trees”. You may wonder if I’m a dotty old lady who believes that trees can talk to us in our language and that we can converse with them. Who could believe that? But I maintain that we can commune with trees. They provide us with the opportunity to still our inner storms. They communicate with us – through silence. So the plot thickens. Life is full of hidden mysteries. I believe, she says, that being with trees – sitting by them, listening to them, brings us closer to wisdom than we can imagine’. And then she offers three different experiences to illustrate the part they play in our spiritual growth.

The first led her to realise that trees can offer sanctuary. When we’re troubled, fearful or angry, a tree can provide us with a sense of reassurance that ‘all will be well’. Their silent presence conveys a language of compassion and understanding that can touch something deep within us. Trees have time to listen. They’re not in a hurry to move on. Many will outlive us. The life cycle of a tree has something to say to us about our own hopes that death isn’t the ultimate end but a passage into new life and we’ve reflected something of that in the symbol used for our Autumn services at 6.30pm this year.

The second experience came in the symbolism of a Tree of Life exhibited at the British Museum. It conveyed a wordless message of peace and came into being because the people of Mozambique handed in their weapons of destruction in exchange for tools that would be used to rebuild their land after years of bitter warfare.

And the third image reveals something of the healing power of trees when lives are torn and words cannot be found to express feelings.

‘The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.’

‘When they came to the place that is called the Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left.’ And we read in Acts ‘ The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed, by hanging him on a tree.’

This is one of those Sundays when, to experience the true fullness of the day – that we keep as Christ the King – we really ought to listen to all three readings set for they each shine a powerful

light on an element of Christ's kingship. That reading from Jeremiah – longing for integrity in those who rule and looking for the one who would embody all that a ruler should be.

The epistle, from Colossians, had we heard it, finds the author striving to express the glory of Christ as Lord. And then, in utter contrast, in the Gospel we meet Jesus, vulnerable to his enemies and accepting death on the cross, on a tree. But is it, perhaps, in those contrasts that we're offered something of the glory of the Christian faith?

And that image of the tree can make a link for us. After reproaching Judah's rulers for scattering his flock God promises to establish a righteous branch – metaphorically of a tree – of David's line over a restored Israel. As we move towards Advent and Christmas that image of David's line becomes particularly potent for us.

The branch was a popular way of referring to the expected Messiah and the idea of the kings of the Davidic dynasty being shoots from the stock or the tree of Jesse is an old one. It was to become an important theme of Christian iconography and appears frequently in art from mediaeval times onwards. Indeed, we had a Jesse tree in church a couple of years ago.

When Jeremiah speaks of shepherds he was thinking, not in the literal sense of shepherds in the fields, nor in the modern church sense of 'pastor' but in a political sense. He was referring to rulers – the leaders of the little beleaguered kingdom of Judah over which the storm clouds of war were gathering – for kings in those days were seen as shepherds of their people.

Jeremiah is concerned about the quality of those who would be running the country. It seems that past experience hasn't led him to have very high expectations and there's a warning here for all who exercise leadership. But there is also hope. Jeremiah makes a pledge to the people on behalf of God who is seen as the ultimate shepherd. God will gather them back from exile and in the future there will be good rulers – good shepherds . Such is his hope and it is perhaps hard for us not to hear an echo in there of those words of Jesus 'I am the good shepherd'. The ultimate shepherd is God 'The Lord is my shepherd' indeed.

And then that mysterious vision 'The days are surely coming says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.' No doubt Jeremiah was looking to the relatively short-term but that language is full of messianic notes in which we may, with hindsight, discern a promise of the coming of Christ (though obviously we need to be careful about what we read back into scripture) the coming of the king/shepherd who would embody righteousness and offer a vision of justice. But yet there was to be a terrible cost for this shepherd in the gathering of his sheep – the sacrifice of life itself to bring new life for us.

'When they came to the place that is called the Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals' (on a tree). This is a Gospel full of horrors with Christ the King – far from being worshipped by all creation, hanging, writhing, on a cross, alone – as we all will be at death.

It's in that contrast of wonder and hope, splendour and darkness that we meet the incarnation and the idea of kenosis – God's self-emptying of himself for us. It's in the contrast between the splendour of kingship and the butchery of a crucifixion that we may see something at the very

core of our faith. That Christ, who is Lord is king in one sense and is victim in another – all powerful in one, helpless in another. Source of all life and drained of life.

That's what makes it possible for the mystery of the incarnation to be real for us. That Christ, king and shepherd, chose to enter into life with us and share it with us. That mystery in which he gave all he had for us – all power, all glory, all beauty. In John Betjeman's words ' the maker of the stars and sea, became a child on earth for me.'

At first sight that gospel reading of the crucifixion seems an appalling one to be given at this time of year and as we mark Christ the King but of course, it is really so right, especially in the world of late 2007 for there is a paradox or perhaps a contrast in it. The passage ends ' Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom' – the words of the thief as he hung, on his tree, beside Jesus. How striking that, when the Christian faith wants to celebrate the kingship of Christ, the attribution of kingship is received from a criminal being publicly executed.

And perhaps even more striking, Jesus' reply ' Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'