

Kingdom Truth

Christ the King 2012

Preached at **Hockwold** and **Feltwell**

Readings:

Daniel :9-10,13-14

Rev 1:4-8

John 18:33-37

+In Nomine

What an extraordinary week in the life of our National Church. The consecration of women as bishops received a setback – six votes sealed the outcome in the House of Laity. Much has been said by various Bishops in the wake of that decision about the need to reflect and pray so... that's what I've been doing since Tuesday evening.

Following the defeat, news headlines were predictable. 'Knife edge vote causes massive rift', 'medley of anguish', 'sad day that leaves the church in chaos', 'biggest crisis for decades', 'devastating blow for morale'. Archbishop Rowan described it as an 'dark day for the Church', and indeed it is for the majority of Anglicans who, in Diocesan Synods, sought a way forward to recognise God's calling of men *and* women to the Episcopate.

+Rowan said that the vote's outcome was a 'devastating blow to morale and harmed the church's credibility and mission'. The Bishop of Manchester also spoke of the Church's credibility and God's mission in that order. A number of others spoke of the church losing its way in modern society. David Cameron went on to say that the Church should 'get with the programme' and needs 'a sharp prod' towards the modern world after its 'disappointing' decision to vote against women bishops whilst Sir Tony Baldry [a gent

disturbingly reminiscent in his ponderous pluminess of Sir Toby Belch] trumpeted that 'the Church has to reflect the values of the nation'.

Not all of these comments sit easy with me. I would answer Sir Toby by saying that the Church exists first and foremost to advance the Mission of Jesus Christ in the world. Mission surely trumps 'credibility'. I wonder if our loss of credibility as a church has more to do with looking inward and dare I say even reflecting the values of the nation too closely for comfort. The Daily Mail – surprisingly for a paper known for sensational journalism – spoke of the National Church's 'navel gazing...all at a time when the nation is in crying need of moral guidance'...and the editor wasn't referring to moral guidance of a fundamentalist variety, but for the church to take a lead in showing compassion, mercy, justice and above all what it means proclaim the truth that life is sacred, especially those lives of the vulnerable and needy, the very young and the very old, lives that the 'nation' as a whole ceases to value. I'm concerned that the more obsessed the church becomes with 'image', the further from the Gospel we will find ourselves.

It is important to comment on the broad strands of argument in the Synod debate. Firstly, Synod was not debating if women could or could not be consecrated as Bishops. That was decided in 2005. Synod was hoping to find consensus on provision for those who could not accept female Episcopal oversight. But, the debate raged around the theological principle already decided. Conservative Evangelicals argued from two texts – one Pauline and one pseudo-Pauline stating that a woman may not be the 'head' of a man, nor should she teach or preach. Traditional Catholics argued that the Church has no authority to change what Jesus 'decreed' in His choice of twelve men to lead the church. Neither considers the 1st century cultural context and the Catholic argument ignores that the Church in Council under the guidance of the Holy Spirit has effected many changes throughout the centuries – Nicaea and Chalcedon being primary examples. The Holy Spirit remains active and was not pensioned off after Pentecost. Though it may not seem like it at

present, the Spirit remains active in our Church today – if we allow Him - and will continue to guide us as we seek God’s purpose.

In following the Synod debate as it unfolded, I was dismayed at the theological incoherence of many ‘pro’ measure speakers. David Kemp from Canterbury offered a moving little ‘parable’ of God and the Otter in which God says to His furry friend: ‘They’re fencing me in with their history, their Book and their ideas again’. Christina Rees expounded the ‘Parable of Indiana Jones’ whilst Canon Dagmar Winter quoted Leonard Cohen and Barack Obama. The overwhelming argument here was that Christianity’s relevance lies in reflecting society around it. Jesus didn’t really get a look in and the Gospels didn’t seem at all relevant. Yet it in the Gospels, I contend that the most powerful support for the ‘pro’ group lies. And today’s great feast of Christ the King endorses this. In this morning’s Gospel we see Jesus standing before Pilate. First, he tells Pilate that ‘my kingdom is not of this world’ and then he speaks of coming to ‘testify to the truth’. Of course Jesus’ Kingdom was and is ‘not of this world’. Jesus came to break through the selfish, power obsessed, inward looking, exclusive way of the world with self sacrificing, self giving love to proclaim complete inclusivity for all in *His* Kingdom. No one... men, women, children, slaves, those prostitutes, adulterers, tax collectors, thieves, lepers, terrorists who came to Jesus in faith were excluded from the Kingdom. Look at the ‘twelve’ – the ‘first’ bishops – what rag tag, diverse lot they were. This wonderful inclusive Kingdom of God revealed by Jesus is the absolute antithesis of ‘the world’ then and now- a world, a nation with its priorities entrenched in power, ambition, wealth, class and a mean spirited lack of generosity.

Here we have the crux of the problem! This debate is rooted in Episcopal authority, Episcopal power and who may exercise it. Who sits at the right hand of Jesus...who sits at the left – who is robed in purple... Who is ‘Boss’.

None of this equates at all with the quietly spoken prisoner standing before Pilate, *the one who did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.*

Episcopal authority in Tuesday's debate unfolded as desirable for its own sake – even a reward for talent or hard work in the Church's service. This is way off the mark. Consecration to the Episcopacy doesn't equate with secular promotion. Consecration as a bishop isn't a reward for intelligence, or theological brilliance or political astuteness or charm or being a financial whizz-kid or even a former oil executive. Bishops are *consecrated*...set apart by the laying on of hands with the huge responsibility of using their gifts in serving others...and primarily intensifying their priestly life and witness through offering the Holy Sacrifice at the altar for all. Bishops are not, as Jemima Thackeray wrote in the Telegraph *normal workplace bosses, they are meant to be servants*. Gregory the Great described himself as *servus servorum dei* – the *servant of the servants of God*. Jesus showed the Twelve the way at the Last Supper by kneeling and washing their feet and exhorting them to do likewise. True humility is profoundly counter-cultural. John Paul II, citing 1 Pet 3:15, described the role of a bishop in this way:

The Bishop is called in a particular way to be a prophet, witness and servant of hope...and ...has the duty of instilling confidence and proclaiming before all people the basis of Christian hope. Bishops are called to holiness, to dedicated service and humility. They are also, like all of us, like the first apostles, vulnerable, sinful human beings. Yet despite imperfection, Jesus calls them, as he called Peter to *feed my lambs and tend my sheep*. Bishops are shepherds, imitators of the Good Shepherd whose model of self sacrificing servant leadership they follow. They are first and foremost deacons. Bishops - male or female would do well to keep this prayerfully before them – humility and a grip on reality is crucial in exercising Episcopal oversight.

Jesus showed the true colour of purple. His throne was the Cross, His Crown was thorns, yet he was raised on the Cross to draw all people to himself. Jesus' kingship is grounded in service and sacrifice. He is the Servant King showing:

the scars that speak of sacrifice, hands that flung stars into space to cruel nails surrendered.

His Kingdom is not of this world. Jesus testified to the Truth. That truth is that all are welcome and included in God's Kingdom. I can't be sure why the vote failed in the House of Laity last Tuesday....there are several theories. Maybe, just maybe...painful and frustrating though it is for the Church, might we not be called back, in the power of the Spirit to prayer, reflection, contrition and finally recognition that the Episcopacy is not about wielding power, or gender equality, or reward, or headship, or 'taint' – God help us with that one – but loving and generous service according to the mind of Christ our Saviour. Jesus said:

'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.' Mark 10:42-25

If only our Church can re appropriate this Gospel truth, then... the refreshing wind of the Holy Spirit may blow the Church forward sooner than we imagine to the day when men and women *serve* together in all three orders of ministry.