

Christ the King Sunday

A Clash of Kingdoms

The picture on the screen depicts two crowns – one made of gold and one made of thorns. Two crowns that could hardly be more different, with one comes human power, wealth and prestige; the other weakness, poverty and disgrace.

At the time of Jesus, Caesar was on the throne as Emperor of Rome, his power and authority swept across much of the land of Europe as it is now known to us.

A mighty empire was constructed and people were subjugated to Rome. You had no choice but to submit to Caesar or your fate may be face the lions or hang on a cross; but a kingdom was to grow within the Empire and the kingdom was to take shape through a crucified man whose cross had the title, King of the Jews.

Clash of the Kingdoms would become inevitable.

Yes, in the midst of Caesar's reign, there arose another king, a king that comes riding on a donkey, a king that speaks of a Kingdom beyond the realms of this world, a king who would die in disgrace on one of Caesar's crosses that were made for criminals.

But the King of the Cross is different, he doesn't come to lord it over people; he is a king of compassion and kindness, a king that comes from heaven, to bring his father's love into this world.

A king who gives his people the freedom to choose whether they want to be in his kingdom or not.

The Kingdom of God that Jesus announced and embodied is what life would be like on Earth, here and now, if God were king and the rulers of this world were not. He taught his followers to pray, your Kingdom come on Earth as it is in Heaven.

It's an alternative kingdom with an eternal perspective.

It's a kingdom of peace-making instead of war-mongering; liberation instead of exploitation; sacrifice rather than subjugation; mercy and not vengeance; care for the vulnerable instead of privileges for the powerful; generosity instead of greed; humility rather than pride, and inclusion rather than exclusion. These were the markers of this new kingdom.

In our video clip this morning before the sermon, we saw Jesus and Matthew, and Jesus was sharing with him the marks of this kingdom. Jesus tells Matthew, that he has a map and you will find him, where these attributes are being lived out. Christ is to be found in the poor and the weak and the persecuted. Blessings abound there for Christ is there. “When you do it to the least, you do it to me”, he once said. It is a counter cultural kingdom. It’s a kingdom that speaks into injustice and evil of this world.

It is a kingdom that challenges the Pharaohs, Nebuchadnezzars, Herods, Neros, Maos, Hitlers, and many others — who have persecuted God's people. The Apostle John portrays Rome as a terrifying dragon who devours the saints. Thus, at other times, believers subvert rather than submit to state powers, we confront rather than co-operate, as under Nazi Germany and South African apartheid.

There have been radicals such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King who were the voice of the Kingdom of Heaven, in the midst of the kingdom of earth, ironically both were murdered for being that voice that challenged discrimination and evil. Both wore the crown of thorns rather than the crown of gold.

The birth of the King

In just over a month, we will again worship the new born king; the wise men came and worshipped him with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. This king was born under the veil of poverty and in obscurity, and he faced the hardships which any baby born to a migrant and unmarried mother would face today – this was no accident – the king wanted to experience the harsh reality of what it is to be a human. “He became poor, that we might become rich” wrote the Apostle reflecting on Christ's life.

Christ knows what it is to experience the challenges and frustrations of being human. Jesus came to us as a baby, to grow to manhood for he wanted to experience what it was like to be one of us, and so that he could bring us the comfort that we need, for he can then say, I know, I understand, I have been there myself.

In the book of Isaiah at chapter 40, we have the beginning of the second Isaiah – the first Isaiah from chapters 1-39 is about their captive life in Babylon, chapter 40 begins with the words,

¹⁻² “Comfort, oh comfort my people,
 says your God.
 “Speak softly and tenderly to Jerusalem,
 but also make it very clear
 That she has served her sentence,
 that her sin is taken care of—forgiven!
 She’s been punished enough and more than enough,
 and now it’s over and done with.”
³⁻⁵ Thunder in the desert!
 “Prepare for God's arrival!
 Make the road straight and smooth,
 a highway fit for our God.
 Fill in the valleys,
 level off the hills,
 Smooth out the ruts,
 clear out the rocks.
 Then God's bright glory will shine
 and everyone will see it.
 Yes. Just as God has said.”

Words that Christians have connected with the coming of Christ. The straight roads, the valleys filled, the hills levelled; a sign of the arrival of a king, everything being prepared for him, and here he is born in a manger.

But notice the words of comfort and it's to these words that I now turn.

The comfort of the King – I want them to know and experience the comfort of God.

Comfort, comfort my people.

Knowing this King brings comfort. Who would not want a lion to protect them?

Who is our King?

The picture that we have from the writers of the New Testament is this,

God is inconceivable in majesty...we are told that one day every knee shall bow before God;

almighty in power...he is the logos, the power of the universe;

inflexible in justice.... he is the sole righteous judge of us all; but infinite in tenderness...

but the Apostle Paul calls him the God of all comfort – 2 Cor 1 v 5.

The paradox of God.

In Paul's days, the false gods of the heathen world were known to be cruel and ferocious, objects of dread. But how different is the Lord God Almighty. He is a God of comfort, a God of healing and new beginnings. A God who has the strength that can move mountains and yet a God who has the qualities of a loving mother. Is 66 v13

What does the word comfort mean?

The word comfort comes from the latin “con fortis” which simply means “with strength”. “Con” is with and “fortis” mean strong, that’s where our word fort comes from, a strength, a protection against the enemy. David could write, I will say of the Lord, “He is my refuge and my fortress; My God, in Him I will trust.” Psalm 91v2

David didn't want a God who mollycoddled him, he wanted a God who gave him strength; the word comfort has taken a different shape from these early days, the dictionary says it means today, things that make life easy and pleasant, like a warm quilt, and there is that important aspect to the word but it goes far deeper in Christian usage.

Divine comfort comes from God's mercies. So, when we say he is a God of comfort, we are in fact saying, he is a God who comes to us with strength from on high, a God who comes to impart his strength into our lives.

That’s how David could say when facing Goliath, I'm not afraid because I come in the strength of the Lord.

Sometimes we get stressed and depressed. There will be times when we as Christians face those dark moments; we go through the dark valleys and we wonder where is God, the Apostle Paul faced those dark moments in his Christian faith. He tells this to the Corinth Church, listen to his words, he was ready for chucking it all in!

In the film clip, Simba is encouraged to remember who he is. His dad Mufasa tells him to remember who you are. That's a good question to ask of ourselves, who are you? Remember that you were created in the image of God; remember that God knew you before we were born; that God has a plan for your lives; that God is working out his will for you. Remember he said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you!"

Looking back in my ministry, I have witnessed lives being comforted with God's strength. One young lady from a previous charge, had many challenging issues, that kept her depressed and sad, she was looking for love which she didn't receive from her father, but she kept praying and hoping and trusting in a God who was real to her, and the remarkable change in her life when her circumstances changed and she met with the comfort of God; this comfort was not some sticking plaster that made her temporarily feel better, she didn't need people giving her false pity, and saying nice platitudes, the comfort that she needed and received came from God; this comfort was God coming to her with strength – she received the true meaning of comfort, and suddenly she faced up to her lives issues, not merely in her own strength but with the strength of God; she was a young woman who went from strength to strength, and was empowered, the radiance in her face changed as she new God at work in her life.

Then there was a young man that I knew, who endured the devastating loss of a much loved sibling; many people would have crumbled, but he embraced the strength of God, and he went in the opposite direction, he received the comfort of God, and his life was strengthened and today he is leading other souls to God, to find that same comfort which he received in his time of need, for that's what Paul says, that with the comfort that we receive then we can comfort others.

That's what happened to the disciples, after the death of Christ, huddled together in fear of the Jews. Then Jesus appears, suddenly the fears are gone, when he gives them strength, he breathes his comfort into their lives and they are empowered and again at Pentecost, after he ascended into Heaven, he comes through the power of the Holy Spirit and comforts his disciples by empowering them that they may become like lions, ready to take his gospel out into the world and be fearless, not in their own strength but in the strength of God.

Christ the King Sunday, is a Sunday that we stop to take stock; the last Sunday of the Church Year. Next Sunday is a new Church Year; Advent

marks the beginning of this year, when we remember Jesus coming to us as a baby; but that baby becomes our strength, as it has become the strength of countless individuals ever since. The Apostle Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ my Lord!"

Mary the mother of Jesus who through her tears of fear said, "Your will be done" and she found his strength to carry on and be the mother of the Son of God, and we can look at all the disciples and see a common thread that God has turned them from fragile people into being people who can move mountains.

The question that comes to us this morning is this, is God your strength? does he bring his comfort to you, a comfort that strengthens you and equips you for life?

You see, that's what coming to church is really about, it's about coming and being recharged with God's strength, every Sunday should be a Sunday when we are transformed, when our batteries are renewed and we feel like going back into the world and facing up to our daily challenges.

Remember who you are, said Mafasa to Simba, and that's my word to us also today, remember who you are, you are a child of the most high.

It doesn't matter who you are, a young person starting off on life's journey, carrying a lot of heavy baggage or an elderly person who has walked a long journey, and overcome many pitfalls and dangers, and yet still feel exhausted, worn out and sad, you also need the comfort of God, you need his strength to keep going and face a new day.

Just as Isaiah did when he told his people,

³⁰ Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall:

³¹ But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.

That's for you and me this morning, God doesn't want us to wallow in self-pity and feel sorry for ourselves; he wants us to be like the eagle and soar high in the sky; he wants us to renew our strength not by our own power but by the power of the Almighty, a power that comes from us from Heaven.

I believe in this power for I believe in God and I believe in a God who has come to us in Jesus to bring life and life in its fullness and I believe in this because I have witnessed, I have seen God working in the lives of many people, people who have had crushing blows, devastating their lives and God has brought them strength and given them deep resilience that has carried them on eagle's wings.