

Strange Meeting

Sermon by David Wilbourne on "Christ the King"

A meeting between kings seldom goes well.

They snarl suspiciously at each other,

regal Dobermans straining at the leash,

ready to tear out each other's throats.

Shakespeare made his name

writing of king after king

encountering king after king,

with tragedy waiting restlessly in the wings.

Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown:

uneasy is the head that meets a crown.

A modern-day Shakespeare

would have made great play

of Queen Victoria's funeral,

with Kaiser Wilhelm II strutting around

in his silly pointy hat

with an annihilation of positively cosmic proportions

just a decade away.

Of course,

meetings between monarchs are not necessarily tragic.

Occasionally Solomons and Shebas

can suspend their power struggles

and simply drink

from each other's wisdom and sheer sexiness.

Queen Salote of Tonga

was well received at our own Queen's coronation in 1953.

This bloated beaming matriarch

on sabbatical from her south sea paradise

posed no threat whatsoever

to a grey, rainy, post-war London:

a meeting between two very different worlds.

So to the meeting between our two kings

in this morning's Gospel.

Both kings are under threat.

Christ obviously so:

a murderous mob is baying for his very life.

But Pilate is under threat too:

Israel was a hornet's nest of a country to occupy,

the Afghanistan of its day,

better left than invaded:

being made governor of Israel was a lose-lose situation.

Pilate didn't really need Jesus to point out

that any power he had was transient and given

rather than earned and permanent:

he would know that all too well.

Given the mutual sense of threat,

the encounter has a terrific air of calm about it.

Pilate, like every honest enquirer since,

takes great pains to find out why so many people

want to see Jesus dead.

Christ's accusers claim he has kingly ambitions,

and that if Pilate sets him free

he will be party to the rebellion.

The logic of Christ's reply is unanswerable:

'If I was a revolutionary,

wouldn't my henchmen be fighting

to release me?'

Unlike the high priests,

Christ has no henchmen.

He comes without body armour,

he carries no weapons:

his sceptre is a reed;

his crown is made of thorns;

his robe is a purple cloak;

butt of the grim charade of a soldier's joke;

his throne is the cross.

His kingdom is indeed not of this world.

At his arrest Christ told his followers,
when they toyed with the role of henchmen,

‘Those who live by the sword
will die by the sword.’

Again unequivocal,
unanswerable logic.

Stalin was told that the Roman Catholic Church
had denounced his despotic regime.

‘And how many battalions has the Pope?’
he sneered.

But that precisely is the point.

The Pope has no battalions
because Christ had no battalions.

The rule of might
was not his way,

that wasn’t his style of kingship,
which was blatantly not of this world
of exerting power by brute force.

‘That must not be the way with you,’
he told his disciples,
‘Whoever would play the king
must be servant of all.’

His leadership role was that of servant-king,
the king who touched the leper,
the king who feasted with the riff-raff,
the king who stooped to wash his disciples dirty feet,
the monarch who wasn’t anointed
in splendour by the Archbishop of Canterbury,
but who allowed a woman of the streets to anoint him.

The king who didn’t nuke his enemies,
but forgave them, even loved them.

In Dennis Potter's play,
the Son of Man,
it suddenly dawns on Pilate
that Jesus' Gospel of loving your enemies
will be the downfall of Rome.

Just as Ghandi's Gospel of loving his enemies
was the downfall of British India.

This king who is not of this world
kicks all other kingships into touch,
and they know it and try to do away with him.

I found myself ploughing the loneliest furrow
at the recent consultation I went to
on the training of bishops.

We were talking about how to make bishops
feel fully equipped to meet the challenge
of the contemporary church and world.

My response was that the truly successful bishop
would feel anything but fully equipped,
but would be before his Lord and his Diocese
empty-handed,
the servant king.

And if that bishop was really, really successful,
he would most likely find himself crucified.

The other people at the consultation
smiled secretly(ish) at each other,
as if they thought I should be sectioned.

But the very best bishops
are those who got themselves
crucified.

In my lifetime,

Januni Lawum ,

Archbishop who stood for the light in Amin's dark Uganda,

Oscar Romero,

Archbishop of a very uneponymous El Salvador.

And I think of George Bell,

Bishop of Chichester during the World War II.

He wasn't physically crucified,

but he was publicly mocked and scorned

as if he was on a cross.

Apparently when the Archbishop of Canterbury

dedicated a chapel in his memory recently

at Chichester Cathedral,

he got protest mail which was positively venomous,

half a century after Bell's death.

Bell's crime?

That he had close touch

with the Confessing Church in Germany,

most notably Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer,

executed just days before the war ended

for his opposition to Nazi tyranny.

Similarly Bell opposed Nazism,

but refused to demonise all Germans.

And he spoke out,

publicly,

against the terrible saturation bombing of Dresden.

Bell was very much an Establishment figure.

But something made him refuse to live by the sword.

Not something.

Someone.

King Jesus whose kingdom was not of this world.

It's good to take stock,

poised on the brink of Advent,

to think not of the coming of Christ the baby,

but the coming of Christ the King,

who puts all our kings

and all our lusting after kingly power
to shame.

In the eyes of the developing world,
we in the West,
even in the midst of a Credit Crunch,
we live like kings, wielding power, wielding wealth.

As we strut around the world like a colossus,
today we are brought up short
as we meet King Jesus.

As I said at the beginning,
A meeting between kings can be so disturbing,
seldom goes well.

Unless today,
we kings in Helmsley decide to make our meeting
with King Jesus
a true meeting
and return to our domains

like T S Eliot's kings in his Journey of the Magi,
no longer at ease in the old dispensation.