

Sermon for Sunday 22nd November 2020
The Feast of Christ the King

Whenever I hear this morning's gospel reading, I am transported back to a trip I made to South Africa in 2012. It was the summer before I was due to begin my training for ministry. My sending church had a link with the parish of St. Peter and St. Paul in Springs which is just East of Johannesburg, and I had arranged to spend just over a fortnight shadowing the Vicar of that parish, Sharron Dinnie. It was, to say the least, a formative time. While I had been involved in the work of my sending parish, I had never been this close to seeing the daily life of a Parish Priest – I stayed in the Rectory with Sharron. And to have my first such experience in a country so different as South Africa was extraordinary.

Towards the end of my visit, in conversation with Sharron, she explained to me that this morning's gospel reading is particularly close to her heart, informing her ministry in Springs. And having spent two weeks with her, I could understand why.

Sharron herself was brought up on the west side of Johannesburg during the apartheid years. As a white South African, she was profoundly affected by seeing the injustices of apartheid. In many ways she devotes her ministry to righting the wrongs of the past. Near to Springs there is an informal settlement called Dagafontein. As Rector of St. Peter and St. Paul, Sharron set about doing something to improve the opportunities of those living in that settlement. Building support among the congregation, she set up a pre-primary school to give the children of Dagafontein access to early education. Gradually children were also sponsored to attend local schools. Uniforms were paid for and a bus service provided. The children returned to the pre-primary school site for help from volunteers in the congregation with their homework.

As you will know, HIV remains a significant problem in South Africa, and since some of the children were orphaned, two houses were built with house mothers to give orphaned children somewhere to live. Sharron's vision was always to build a full school, and in the last few years this has started to come to fruition.

For Sharron – and indeed for many of those working alongside her in this extraordinary project – those words of Jesus simply are not optional extras. They lie at the heart of our faith. That wherever we have the opportunity, there is an absolute imperative that we must feed the hungry; give drink to the thirsty; welcome strangers; clothe the naked; and visit those who are sick or in prison.

It is in doing these things that we come closest to Christ, since we find Christ in those very individuals we serve.

In his sermon last week, John spoke about the call to use our talents. He went further by reminding us that it is only in using those talents that they truly come to fruition; and in cautioning us that as we use them, more will be asked of us. And it is in this week's gospel reading that we really get a sense of where our talents can most fruitfully be used.

So what do Jesus's words mean for us in our discipleship here in Cuddington? Where and how is it that we are called to serve? In whom are we called to see the face of Christ?

On an individual level it may well be a question of exploring those gifts that we have been given and ensuring we find where they can be put to best use. If we look to the example of Jesus, he gave particular attention to those on the margins; to those who were not powerful and whose voices were often drowned out by others. As we draw alongside those who tend to remain unseen, we can sometimes become aware that we are seeing something of Christ.

Perhaps this year – our 125th anniversary year – we need to think more than ever about our discipleship as a church, too. Where, I wonder, are we being called to serve our community? Who are those who feel neglected by the church and need to know that the good news is for them, too?

This has been a challenging year for us all. And to have our anniversary this year has been particularly disappointing, because our plans to reach out have been thwarted by the need to maintain social distance and keep one another safe by avoiding social gatherings.

Yet the call of Jesus does not change. We continue to be asked those questions. Where do we see people in need of food and drink? Where do we see strangers? Those in need of clothing? Those who are sick or in prison?

And let's not be too literal about this. We undoubtedly need to feed those with insufficient food – we only need to look to our local Foodbank to see that the need remains as real as ever. Yet that is not the only kind of nourishment that people need. Likewise, those who are imprisoned may not have to be those who are incarcerated, but could perhaps include those who are isolated and lonely. The gospel speaks into every time and place – it is part of our discipleship to interpret it within our own context.

There is no doubt that if we could have chosen, we would have celebrated this anniversary year differently. Yet if the legacy that we build from our 125th anniversary is to increase our commitment to serve the most marginalised within our community, that will be cause for celebration. There is no need for a special event to listen carefully to the words of Jesus and to take action.

And on this the feast of Christ the King, it is perhaps especially appropriate to recognise that the best way of celebrating may not be exactly what we expected. After all, when people hear that Christ is a King, they expect to see royal robes, pomp and splendour. And instead they see the humble son of a carpenter, riding on a donkey and ultimately put to death by the authorities.

Following Christ rarely turns out exactly as we expect. But as we draw closer to those on the margins and learn to see Christ in them, the transforming power of God's love begins to change the world.

Amen