

2023-11-26 ... 10am Worship Sermon ... Revd Jane Stephenson

Ezekiel 34: 11 – 16, 20 – 24; Ephesians 1: 15 – end; Matthew 25: 31 - end

'Christ the King and Stir-up Sunday'

Today, the Sunday of Christ the King is the last Sunday of the Church year, next week the year begins again with the first Sunday in Advent, four Sundays before Christmas. Christ the King is the glorious and magnificent title for today, but in many ways it should not be confined to one Sunday: it is a title we should perhaps use very week. Acknowledging Christ as our King is fundamental to our faith. Not a king created in the sense that world might demand, but a King whose purpose and mission is to show us that by acknowledging his majesty, we truly accept the ongoing power of his humility and of his love for the world. Understanding this truth of kingship should stir our faith and send ripples into the world around us.

So, in addition to this being the Sunday of Christ the King, one of the official prayers set for today reminds us that it is also "**Stir-Up Sunday.**" Now this title might seem more frivolous: it's a Sunday by tradition synonymous with Christmas puddings. Stir-up Sunday, supposedly accompanied by the great cry 'stir up' was a reminder to congregations to get the Christmas puddings made and stirred, in plenty of time to mature before Christmas. It involved a certain amount of excitement and anticipation about what was to come over the next few weeks. It wasn't quite as frivolous as it sounds because the puddings involved were to be shared by neighbours and family at Christmas. On Stir-up Sunday, by inviting all the family and especially the children to come to help stir, the purpose was explained to them. Thus the children were taught a little more of the Christian story of sharing what you have with all those in need, and of working together to create this feast.

Making it involved some symbolism. A Christmas pudding, as you may know, was traditionally made with 13 ingredients to represent Christ and His Disciples and a proper Christmas pudding was always stirred from East to West in honour of the three Wise Men who visited the baby Jesus. In addition every member of the family was to be involved in giving the pudding a stir and made a secret wish. A silver coin, as many of us will remember, was traditionally added to the ingredients and cooked in the pudding. It was supposedly to bring wealth to whoever found it on their plate on Christmas Day. Other additions to the pudding might include a ring, to foretell a marriage, and a thimble for a lucky home.

However, the name '**Stir Up Sunday**' really has nothing to do with these myths, or even with puddings, but comes from the opening words of the Collect (Special Prayer) for the Day on the last Sunday of the Church Year in the Book of Common Prayer, first included in 1549. It wasn't actually until Christmas puddings became fashionable in the mid C19 that this became the traditional day to go home after church and make your puddings. The original prayer for the day has today been adapted into more modern language and though it remains a BCP Collect, it is often the Church of England's Prayer after Communion on this day. These are the words we shall say at the end of our Eucharist today. the prayer for which Stir Up Sunday is actually named

"Stir-up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

The 'Stir Up' prayer is asking God for something much more important than a pudding. We are praying that, as the season of Advent approaches, with its time of reflection and its promise of the coming of Christ, God will stir up our wills, so that we might prepare to be in a proper state to receive him. Stir us up, Lord, so that we might begin to do the good works that you have planned for us to do. Then, we might receive our abundant reward, not in terms of wealth or prosperity, but in terms of becoming living and functioning members of Christ's body.

Charles Royden, Vicar of St Mark's Church in Bedford, writes:

"In an age when so much is about how we feel, it is interesting to get another perspective. PTO

In the end, as the 'stir up collect' reminds us, it is not our feelings, but our will that is the most important governor of our actions. Real love is not about feeling, it is about choosing, by our wills, to do good to others, as God would have us do, even though we may not always feel good towards them. Our feelings should not dominate our wills and our wills should be aligned to God's will. And so we pray today that God will "stir up" our wills, so that they will be in charge of us, doing what we know is right. In this prayer we recognise that we need God's help in order for our wills to function properly. Our will to follow Christ, our will to be open and honest about our beliefs and our will to do good despite our own inadequacies."

This is also therefore the time to stir up our own memories to remind ourselves and each other on this Sunday of Christ the King that Advent truly heralds the coming of Christ our King. In fact, not unlike Stir Up Sunday, Christ the King is a relatively modern title for the Sunday before Advent. The name was proposed by Pope Pius XI and adopted by The Roman Catholic Church and later the Church of England only in 1925. Adopting this title was a deliberate act intended to encourage Christians to stand up to the growing political dictatorships of the world. Poignantly relevant in today's global conflicts I fear. Fascism, and Communism were opposed to each other, but both denied freedom of thought and belief outside their own manifestos. Christianity was side-lined and increasingly outlawed. The rule of Christ was seen as a direct challenge to these new ideologies. In adopting the Sunday of Christ the King, the churches wished to proclaim to the world, in the face of growing persecution, that Christ's kingship comes from a loving God, who grants us freewill to accept his ways of justice and peace.

The serious challenge of accepting Jesus' kingship is reflected in the Gospel passage for today. Even in today's world that sovereignty of Christ is threatened both by active persecution and by ridicule and indifference. Jesus' words in Matthew's Gospel are a challenge to us all. If we wish to be counted with his flock and not cast out with the goats, then we must align our actions to his will. We do not serve with thought of reward, and we will not enter his kingdom by our own merit, but by God's grace. Christ the King does not impose the will of dictatorship, but of a loving God. Do we follow God's will and side with the poor, the needy, the rejected, the misunderstood, with those whom society usually rejects? Do we even see these people in the world around us and do our actions bring God's loving care to them? The passage in Matthew comes just before the betrayal and arrest of Jesus. He warns his followers to hold firm and invites them to become the Body of Christ. Those who will not recognise his kingship will reject his identity and rely on the power of political institutions. Jesus will appear before the Authorities as utterly powerless, but it is he who wields all the power because he knows where his power comes from and what it really means.

We have a King in Jesus who spends his time caring for the weak and frail, who, tortured and hung on the cross, is still opening the gates of his kingdom to the bewildered, misled, rabble around him. Human kings gain power in order to reign over us, Jesus demonstrates his authority by showing such forgiveness and love for his people, that he gave his life for us on that cross. Today is a day when we can encourage each other, as a body of Christ, when we can remind ourselves that Christ is our King. Today is a day when we are encouraged to own Christ in our hearts. To stir one another up and remind ourselves that the advent of Jesus Christ should allow him to be king of every part of our lives. We can move towards Advent and prepare ourselves for the coming of King Jesus at Christmas.