

**SERMON CHRIST CHURCH QUEANBEYAN 18.11.07 – ‘CHRIST THE KING’
Bp O Dowling**

IS HE A KING THEN?

Readings: Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43

It's good for Gloria and me to be back among you, and on your Patronal Festival. I've just been reading a biography of Pierce Galliard Smith, 'Pioneer Parson of Early Canberra' by John Cope. Smith was Rector of St John's for 51 years from 1855-1906 – a persistent but rather dry and humourless character, it would seem. It does well however for St John's people to remember that they grew out of Queanbeyan, which had a settled ministry first, the first Rector being another Smith, Edward Smith and no relative, and I suspect not quite as tedious as Pierce. The first resident minister at St John's George Gregory was a deacon-curate of Queanbeyan and lost his life crossing the flooded Monaro, as you may know, on the eve of his proposed marriage to a young lady of this parish. So as a former Rector of St John's and an admirer of Fernando Soares' architecture I always thought of Christ Church as having an important regional influence in its worship and ministry. May it continue. We feel connected in prayer ministry too, all the more important to us at the moment.

As I looked at the juxtaposition on page 2 of your readings for today, sent on ahead by Ian, I couldn't help noticing a very powerful contrast – in some ways a shocking and very confronting contrast.

In the Colossians' reading there are huge statements and claims made about Jesus – the Christ, the Messiah, spoken of in his official title throughout. 'He is the image of the invisible God'; 'In him all things were created' says St Paul, and John's Gospel makes the same claim 'Without him was not anything made that was made.' In other words he, Christ, is God's agent of creation, sharing an eternity of glory with God. These are enormous statements about him. 'He is before all things', says Paul, 'in him all things hold together'. He's the head of the church and it's fitting that we should call any place of worship and gathering, and in fact the gathering itself, as Christ's Church or 'Christ Church'. There are many other notable examples, not least Canterbury Cathedral, the mother church of the Anglican Communion!

Jesus Christ of Nazareth is the focus for us, not only of our worship and faith in God, our point of living and our hope in dying. More than that we dare to claim with the apostles that he is the lynchpin of all creation giving meaning and point to everything.

Then our eye goes down to the next reading. It hit me like a rocket ... 'When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus' – they strung him up and nailed him to a gibbet, a tree – part of his own handiwork – they crucified him there on that rock that looked like a bald skull with two notorious criminals who according to Mark's gospel spat on him, swore at him and reviled him. People stripped him of his clothing and of any dignity he might presume to have. His admirers stood by and did nothing and the rest of the people and the leaders scoffed and went on scoffing. King of Kings indeed!

Could this be the same person spoken of in Paul's letter or the beginning of John's gospel? Is this the person of whom we say every Sunday, every one of us, 'by him all things were made'? Is it possible that the creator of the universe could be treated like this? If we were going to create a religion about him, would we allow such an advertisement, such an idea as the basis of it – a naked, tortured, abused and badly beaten man strung up in the company of criminals at the place that had the smell of

death about it always – a place of cursing, deliberate and prolonged cruelty, and death.

I seem to be going on about it, but the contrast, the throwing together of the glory and the suffering – the power and strength images, the cosmic energy, the weakness, tragedy, cursing and isolation images immediately against that, is severely confronting. If we can't feel the contrast I would say we're cushioned by familiarity; a kind of complacency can take hold of us in church because we've heard it all before. Perhaps we've lost our first love as the Book of Revelation puts it.

But when things go badly for us, when we're in a hole or a really dark place; when we feel that we've failed others and ourselves, or that everything had gone pear shaped, that's when we may realize that this one we own as king of the universe, lord of all creation, did go to the very darkest, lowest, most shitty place for me, for you, for everyone in order that we might be saved and reconciled. He represents and is to us the God who comes right alongside us in our mess and helplessness. 'He descended into hell'. I know this refers to Christ dying and going to the world of the dead – that he might reconcile all to himself. An important part of the gospel, the good news of Jesus, however, is that he went to real human hell for us all. The conquest of darkness by the light, the triumph of love over hate, forgiveness mercy and love over eternal bitterness and isolation involves in a real, not imaginary way, Jesus' physical suffering and death 'under Pontius Pilate' – that is, as an actual historical event.

With that reality presented to us by Luke's gospel today we are able to go back to the theory and theology of Colossians. There we see the truth of the final statement in the reading: 'Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things (i.e. all beings, all persons) whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace by the blood of the cross.'

So far we've stayed with the wonder, the amazing wonder and grace of what the creator God has done for us in Christ. Are we just spectators? Do we merely applaud on the sidelines, and say 'very good, very good!' and then go on our way? Or are we really changed by this man and this knowledge – deeply changed? Is there something being said to us about our part in the whole movement of peace and reconciliation for all of creation and humanity? We certainly can't tackle the whole lot, but we can say 'Lord show me my part in following you. Show us, as Christ's family here in this town and historic parish how we can best be your people. You will no doubt give us a part as agents of reconciliation and understanding and help all things to come together in him as you have planned.

Paul does speak of Christ's strength enabling us to endure everything with a good spirit. Not easy. But it's an amazing strength of loving that our king and creator has shown us, and everyone, and can impart to us.

It is for us to receive that strength into us afresh. Body of Christ strengthen me!
Blood of Christ inebriate me afresh with your love!