

CHRIST THE KING

Over the last couple of weeks the world has been in shock over the terrorist attacks in Paris. It has been horrific.

You're probably aware that the Paris attacks were not isolated events. On 12 November 2015, two suicide bombers detonated explosives in a southern suburb of Beirut, Lebanon, inhabited mostly by Shia Muslims. Reports of the number of deaths ranged from 37 to 43.

That event came twelve days after the bombing of a Russian airliner over the Sinai Peninsula which killed 224 people.

These events are literally the tip of the iceberg. There is a page in Wikipedia - the internet encyclopedia - which details all the terrorist attacks reported in the world during 2015. You may be interested to know that to date - November 22nd - there have been 306 terrorist attacks throughout the world. That averages out to almost one per day! There have been 26 terrorist attacks across the world in November so far. In September, there were 49! The attacks predominantly occur in the Middle East & Africa, but India, the Philippines, the USA and now even Australia, have been targeted.

It's depressing; it's sickening - to know that there are members of the human race who can do this to each other; that there are governments that condone it, or at the very least, turn a blind eye.

And those world powers that do have some sense of responsibility - seem to have little or no power to bring about change.

I have had two separate conversations with people this week who have expressed their sense of despair at the state of our world. I don't blame them for feeling that way.

How are we as Christians to interpret these events?

Today is the Sunday we call Christ the King. The readings set for today put the things that are happening around us into perspective - God's perspective.

The Gospel reading from John 18 records an intense and provocative encounter between Jesus & Pontius Pilate. Jesus had been arrested and brought before him.

“So - are you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate.

That question would actually have put Jesus in a tricky situation. If he'd simply said "Yes, I'm the King of the Jews" - which was in fact true - Pilate may well have reacted by accusing Jesus of treason on the spot and dragging him off to the dungeons immediately.

Pilate was charged with keeping the peace in Jerusalem - a difficult enough job with the powerful Sanhedrin on one hand, and radical groups like the Zealots & the Essenes on the other; not to mention the hordes of travellers in Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. The last thing Pilate needed was some crackpot Jew asserting yet another faction, and calling himself King of the Jews.

So Jesus had to hedge a little. He answered by saying, (and this is the Message version) "My kingdom doesn't consist of what you see around you. If it did, my followers would fight so that I wouldn't be handed over to the Jews. But I'm not that kind of king, not the world's kind of king."

That confused Pilate. "So you are a king then?" he asked.

Again, Jesus' response would not allow Pilate to tar him with the same brush as earthly kings. He said, "You're the one saying I'm a king." Then he stated his mission. He said, "I was born into this world to tell people about the truth. And everyone who belongs to the truth knows my voice."

At this point, Pilate had probably decided that Jesus was not much of a threat, and in a moment of contemplation, he muttered quite a revealing question, "What is truth?"

He then tried to talk the Jews into letting Jesus go - but as we know - he didn't try hard enough.

How do we understand the Kingdom of God?

Karly has just survived the ordination panel. She told me they didn't ask her any curly theological questions, but they did when I went before them. One question was, "How do you understand the Kingdom of God?" When I reflected on the answer I gave at the time, I wasn't happy with it. Neither was the panel - they felt my answer was simplistic and said so in the report. Taken by surprise, I'd said the first thing that came to mind, which was that the Kingdom of God consisted of those people who had given their lives to Christ. Well that's true of course, but it was only part of what I could have said.

If I hadn't been so stressed, and had given myself time to think before blurting out the first thing that came into my head, I'd have said something more like this:

1. That the kingdom of God does consist of those who live under Christ's rule.
2. That the kingdom of God is both now and not yet; meaning that as we place ourselves under Christ's rule, we become part of his kingdom on earth, here and now. But the Kingdom is also 'not yet' in the sense that we wait for it's fulfilment when Christ returns in all his glory, renewing all of creation, and setting everything right.
3. That through the Church - that is, those who live under Christ's rule - the transforming love of Jesus can be brought to bear on a broken and hurting world, as we await his return to complete this work.

Pity we can't go back and say things differently at times, isn't it?

So how does a better understanding God's kingdom help us when we consider the state of the world around us? How does it help us live with the atrocities that assault this world day after day?

Our reading from Revelation 1 gives us some further insight as we think about that question. John greets the seven churches in Asia with these words, "Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come..."

God is described as he who WAS, who IS and who IS TO COME.

This simple greeting tells us:

- a. that God WAS (past tense). In other words that God has been with us, throughout world history since the dawn of time. He has been there, grieving at the way we have steered the world since we removed ourselves from his rule, yet loving us so much that he sent his Son, to reconcile us to himself.
- b. that God IS. (present tense). God is with us now. In the midst of all that is wrong in the world, he has not abandoned us. It may feel like that - and often people will shake their fists in God face, so to speak, blaming him for the things that happen. But the carnage in the world is not God's doing - it is our doing. Back at the beginning of the human race, God gave us the choice to live under his rule, or to go it alone. What we see around us is a result of how we have chosen to use our autonomy. But God has never stopped loving us.

In the here and now, through his people - the Church - God brings healing and peace in the power of his Spirit. So many movements in human history which have brought about social change have been led by people who belong to God's kingdom - and those inspired by that kingdom. So much suffering and pain on a personal level can be soothed as God's people become his hands and feet in this world, and express his love.

c. that God IS TO COME. (future tense) I find it a great comfort to know that ultimately all the suffering and pain that surrounds us will one day be healed.

As we read at the end of Revelation, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

When Jesus said to Pilate that he had come to tell people about the truth - the truth he was talking about was the Kingdom of God:

- a kingdom that was eternal and which transcended all earthly kingdoms;
- a kingdom governed by a servant King who gave his life for his subjects;
- a kingdom in which the King's subjects partner with their King to bring healing and peace;
- and a kingdom in which all will finally be made new through Christ our King.

So how does all this help?

When we catch a vision of God's love for all people and for the earth, we then catch a clear vision of our task towards helping renew the creation as his servants.

God has not left us powerless, at the mercy of those who would damage and destroy our world. He has given us his Spirit, and the mandate to love and transform this world in his name. As we engage in that mission, our fears can fade into the background.

When we discover that all of history is bounded by the decision of God, we are set free from the need to panic about our own generation; instead, we are challenged to take hold of our time as disciples of Jesus Christ, and to make a difference.

Being a subject of God's kingdom will not always mean a life of peace and plenty. Many servants have suffered and died for their faith. But one thing

we can be certain of is that those who seek to spread fear and terror among us may win the odd skirmish, but they will never win the battle.

We serve the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and he will be victorious.

Let's pray.