

Sermon at S Andrew, Catford

Christ the King

20th November 2011

In the name of the Father, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I must confess that I have never voted in a phone vote. I wonder if anyone here did last night? Did you cast your vote for Russell or are you a Jason Donovan fan? Perhaps you prefer the style of Chelsea Heeley or Robbie Savage?

There is, I think, something rather wonderful about Strictly Come Dancing. Not just because Bruce Forsyth has been presenting Saturday evening television since I was a child and watching him now reminds me of evaporate milk and jelly at my grans forty years ago.

I think one of the special things about Strictly is what one of my friends calls 'teeth, tits and knicker elastic'. We love the glitz and the glamour of it. I think Strictly gets it right because it works in theatre musical theatre works, it uses everything at its disposal to give the viewers a good time and a positive experience but it doesn't take itself too seriously. It is a great model I would suggest for the church's liturgy, the glitz and glamour of our worship draws us into a common experience, although I'm not sure if Fr Lindsay will think of himself as a Jason or a Harry.....

But I think there is actually something rather more impressive about Strictly and something we can learn from it for our Christian lives on this feast of Christ the King. Unlike so many competitive programmes winning on Strictly is not just a matter of luck or chance. Nor even is it a matter of innate skill. What is made clear over and over again in the programme is that great dancing is the result of hours and hours of hard work, perspiration not inspiration.

On a feast like today's it would be easy to imagine that we should just be thinking about the glitz and the glamour of Christ our King; that we should imagine him in all his glory, surrounded by hosts of angels. But I suspect that we need to look a bit deeper. Of course, we know that Jesus is the servant king, that he is enthroned not on a cloud of glory but on the cross of shame.

Today's feast is about who is the king of our lives. Who is in charge, who is the leader. Now this is an area that interests me greatly. As headmaster of a secondary school, as someone who deals with young people all the time I think leadership is a crucial issue for us as a society. I suspect that one of the reasons that so many schools have failed is that they have not developed leadership effectively.

I am a great believer in hierarchy, I believe in school that we should recognise that adults are adults and children are children. Despite what some people would have us believe authority is not a bad thing. However, the acceptance of hierarchy of true authority is a complex process.

At Trinity we have, what we call Trinity Etiquette which, we hope characterises our behaviour towards one another. we worked on it together to decide what it should include.

What we decided on for Trinity Etiquette is:

courtesy
kindness
self control

and its that last one that is at the heart of what I want to say today.

We don't talk a lot about self control as a society, we are more likely to talk about expressing oneself, or talking about self fulfilment.

Yet self control is a profoundly Christian term, in the letter to the Galatians chapter 5 vv 22-23 St Paul talks about the fruit of the Spirit

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Now self control might seem like the exact opposite of putting Christ in control of our lives. It might appear to be ultimate in individualism and the antithesis of christian community.

The answer lies in what happens to us when we are baptised. The fathers tell us that when we are baptised we become little 'christs'. As St Paul puts it at the end of today's second reading we enter into 'the fullness of him who fills all and is in all'.

Christ is not therefore someone outside of us, but is the very heart of who we are. When we are self-ish and pursue what we think we want or need we are pursuing the interests of the false self. When we make Christ the king of our lives we are not bowing down to something alien to us, to some external power but seeking to place our true self at the heart of our lives. Self control is what today's feast of Christ the King is really about, the establishment of the authentic true self as the master of our lives.

That is demonstrated I believe by the icon I have brought to St Andrew's today. The original is a small fourth century icon from north Africa and it hangs in the Louvre in Paris. In modern times it has been widely used by the monks of the Taize community in France and has become known as the icon of friendship. It shows Jesus with a friend and you can just see Jesus arm around his friend his hand holding his far shoulder. It is a very tender image but also one with great poise and self control.

Each summer term we take a large group of our Year 10, fifteen year old pupils to spend a week at Taizé. I stood in front a copy of this icon with one boy who just said to me as we looked at the image 'He is so together isn't he'.

Jesus is so together, he is the completely integrated person while so many of us live disintegrated lives in which we lose self-control.

This morning I am going to mention two techniques in which we can acknowledge Jesus as the true and only king.

Like Strictly Come Dancing we will have to work at this, it will take time to learn and perfect the steps of the dance of our christian lives, to exercise the self control needed to live a fully integrated life to be as together a person as Jesus is.

The first technique is quite simple and is usually known as the Jesus Prayer. It's a kind of mantra. the form I use is this:

Lord Jesus Christ, son of God have mercy on me a sinner.

The key is to repeat it thousands of times a day until it becomes as natural as breathing. At first you will need to say the words aloud, later the mind will think them. It's a good practice for lying awake in bed; for standing at queues. After a while the Jesus Prayer becomes a familiar friend, it is the hand of Jesus on the shoulder. It provides the still centre in which we can exercise true self-control.

The second technique can be linked to it. It is a technique we use every day at Trinity in our whole school worship, tutor groups and in smaller meetings. We call it Breathing Spaces or mindfulness. So often children are told to 'pay attention' but no one shows them how to do that. So often they are told to be quiet but not taught how to be silent.

Again it is something that our pupils noticed at Taizé where during the three times a day services there is a ten to fifteen minute silence at every service. When the first group came back from Taizé they told the School Council that what they enjoyed best were the silences (you can see an interview with those children in a video on our website).

In every room at Trinity there is a three minute sand timer to measure the silence. The silences are incredibly powerful as one pupils aid to me after a three minute breathing space between two pupils who had been arguing: 'It doesn't matter what you think at the beginning of the breathing space, it's always different by the end'.

Guided three minute breathing space.

When we live every moment with Jesus as our king, we will follow the warmth of his hand on our shoulder, we will be in control of our selves and we will know that no storm, no event in our lives can overthrow he who is king of all and whose kingdom is the foundation of our lives.

Dance, dance, wherever you may be
I am the lord of the dance, said he
And I lead you all, wherever you may be
And I lead you all in the dance, said he