

Sermon preached St. Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney, 21-11-10, 10 a.m.,  
by The Revd. Dr. Margaret M. Yee, Minister of the United Reformed Church, United  
Kingdom, and Senior Research Fellow, St. Cross College, University of Oxford.

Bible Readings: Jeremiah 23:1-6; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23: 33-43

### CHRIST THE KING

It is extraordinary for me today to come to speak to you in this place. For this was the very place where my call to the Christian Ministry was first put to the test, when I was proposed by the Late Rev. Graham Hardy and the Session of this congregation for ministry. Much water has flowed beneath the bridge since then, so to be invited to come and speak meaningfully to you to-day has deep resonance for my husband Malcolm and me. We are both thankful for the kind invitation.

We live in a world today which is very troubled, and in need. Some are doing well in the world. Many are not. Some nations are managing, surviving and have promise: this is surely true for Australia. But there are nations that are struggling, concerned, in danger of floundering. We are not only in a financial crisis; but in terms of peaceful survival, are confronted with frightening instability and uncertainty.

Travelling from the other side of the world, from Oxford to Australia, I could not help but feel the contrasting difference. Things seem far less hopeful on the side of the world where I have come from.

Yet, here we are together, reflecting on Christian hope: on the Christian promise integral to our faith. Most importantly, does "Christ the King," the very theme designated for us to focus on in our worship to-day, have something primary to say to each of us, personally, or professionally, whichever side of the world we come from?

I believe that those with whom we live and work, day by day, are as interested as we are to pinpoint what is authentic, stabilising and inspiringly exciting for life. And if you and I could let them see that this is something that is free, and will not cost them a penny: that they do not need to pay for it, or look for a two for one, or need to buy two before they can get one free, they are bound to be interested!

This is just what we possess – life itself: a life capable of finding the greatest of all loves, and exploring that pilgrimage of faith and joy in a new and different way.

Life is not meant to be lived alone, isolated, meaningless. Life and love are gifts to be discovered, experienced and shared.

The Oxford Philosopher and Theologian, Austin Marsden Farrer, with whom so much of my own learning, teaching and now research work has been involved, has written many interesting articles in which he discusses: "The starting point."

What will be *our* starting point, if we are to find this very authenticity of life of which I speak?

We are all so different – some things suit some folk better than others. Some in life pursue a straight and narrow path; others explore rather windy, bendy roads; others have sought the road to life over hills and dales, whilst some of us, perhaps, may wish to be nothing more than a “lay –about,” similar to some of my students, soaking up the sunshine, hoping life will not pass us by, just enjoying things as they come our way.

One of the things Farrer argued was this: wherever your starting-point; whichever the road you might travel, diligently or otherwise, sooner or later you are bound to come up against the inescapable – perhaps, at first, it will seem to you to be nothing more than a blockage, a frustration, an impassable gateway. But, without giving in, and perhaps with a little patience, human life has a way of being inspired mentally, of enabling us to see a way through unexpectedly.

This is what it can be like at times, when we travel what may seem to be nothing more than a rather mundane, finite pathway, when human things come up against greater things. We may think it is a blockage, an impassable difficulty. We may become frustrated, annoyed, decide to look for greater power, greater control, try to force our way through.

But supposing that love and life are not just mechanical, materialistic things, operating on that scale – like a machine.....

Life and love have within them quite different potentialities, powers, possibilities. When human things are touched by divine things, this is not a conflict or a confrontation – strangely it can be a transforming, transpiring moment – this is when simple, ordinary things, can become extraordinary, because we are touched by a divine hand.....

Recently, I have been wondering how Christian faith ever came to my home, my family and heritage. One is told much by one’s parents, but only last weekend did I hear how this transforming love and faith touched my own family. It had to do with my great grandfather, whom I never knew, who lived in a country area, well out of the grand city, Swatow, China, today known as Shantou. He suffered from a cataract, and had to be treated at a hospital in Swatow. Whilst there, he was treated by doctors and nurses some of whom were from Scotland, and it was there that he came in touch with Christian Love and faith. His eyes were fine after treatment; but there was more – it was there that he found a new way of living – Christian faith – a faith that did not leave him.

On returning to his village life, I am told that he used to walk some 1.5 hours every Sunday to his nearest church, and back again. This Greatest Love was not to be tampered with or neglected. Later home churches were also held, and that faith and

love of God moved through the generations. Then came the time when my grandfather and grandmother's generation, and my own father, his brothers, sisters, and their spouses, saw this faith spread. By the time of the Revolution in China, when devastation, heartbreak, torture, separation and trauma fell upon these people, it was their faith which kept them. After such long, long years, through terrible times, it was this depth of faith and love that sustained them. When much later, in more recent years, they were allowed to worship once more, there were some 40,000 who crammed back into the church services in thanksgiving, in friendship, in care and support once again.

From early times, no one could have imagined how that hospital visit and care given by Scottish missionaries and medics would prove so foundational for the survival of those peoples, becoming an ongoing heritage in which the divine and human co-ordination of God's Love has continued to bless a whole heritage.

So what is this love? What is this involvement by which "Christ the King" can bring authenticity to life and love, a love that can overarch our living, whatever should befall?

We may not think our scripture readings have much profound depth for contemporary life. But are we greatly mistaken in thinking this way?

When turmoil, unrest, crisis, upheaval touch our personal life, and great turmoil our global life, how is it that "Christ the King" brings authenticity?

Let us reflect back for a moment. Even in Judah and Israel, 500-600 years before the coming of Christ, the people then sought *authentic* leadership which could transform their living. In order to survive political dilemmas, from the time of the great Assyrian Empire, to its downfall and the rise of the Babylonian powers, with the provincial hold of Israel, the taking of Judah into exile, the struggles of Egyptian powers as well, Judah's future was always in hazard. Yet her own kings, other than Josiah who sought to follow the Book of Law found in the Temple, *could not offer authenticity of rule*. Their values, their foci, were not centred on the greatest of all loves. They failed to remember that they were creatures of a divine Creator.

Political dilemmas do indeed prove troublesome at times. A nation, a people without a central focus and perspective is bound to lose direction. Similarly, a business, a corporation, an institute, needs direction, sound values. To be without transparency and integrity, even in our contemporary times, we have ended up watching banks and companies, national trusts, civil life, teeter on the edge of near destruction.

The promise of God to his people, to his creation, was always to bless and protect them – for this is the bond we have with our maker. But how easy it is to be diverted; for other hungers and powers to become primary in our focus; for perspective and the deep values of life, even unconsciously, to become lost.

In personal life – in our relations with one another – how easy it is to forget, to get into conflict, to misunderstand, for barriers to form. Judah’s loss of God’s protection was because they forgot the covenant made. Yet God could not and would not fail them ever, even when *they* forgot his love, and sought other loves. He longed for their return.

So keen is God’s Love for us, his promise was for a future king, one from the House of David that would live with authenticity and transparency. There would not be underhanded undermining, lack of integrity, deceit. Reality is only found where there is truth, deep compassion and humility in life.

If people cannot respect one another, culturally, personally or professionally, the bonds of life and love will be lost. The horror will be misjudgements, betrayal of trusts, and ultimately sacrifice if not crucifixion. The costs can be great; reality and sound living missed, reality unrealised.

Yet, the wonder of our faith, the enormous love of God for us, is to call us back, to be reconciled; to begin to listen to one another; understand, reach beyond the limited horizons of small-minded thinking and prejudice.

Christ the King has brought authenticity and a new pathway for life. Without authentic love and the blessing of God’s overarching reign, paths forward may lead us into greater pitfalls; our values will be bound to be misinformed, lack resonance, cease, to be lasting.

In the thought-provoking documentary film titled “Apocalypse – the Second World War,” presently being shown on UK television, the horrors of human misjudgement in the life of Hitler and the Nazi rule have in retrospect enabled us to see the curdling misdemeanours of world-leadership which were so grotesquely misshapen by passion and desire for dominant power.

Dare we fail to take hold of reality and be rid of such distortion? Dare we seek the perspectives that can bring hope for succeeding generations?

As Colossians reminds us, Christ is the image of the invisible God – in His life we have been made cognisant of the magnitude and possibilities for human life. Together in the power of His love, an understanding and learning can be brought in education and practice to our world, to our very faith. In bringing theology in conversation with economics at present in the University of Oxford, this is our hope for education and economic practice as we work on our major project for “Morality of Profit.” If our scholarship is not imbued with the profound values of theological understanding, how can such influence prevail?

God’s love for us is not only to transform our living, but to transform the world around us.

We need to be reminded that Christ's kingship was won through *reversing* human failure and misunderstanding. They took away his dignity; they scoffed, they ridiculed, they berated his values, they stripped him naked.....But in so doing, they laid bare the fact that Christ's Kingship was not made of human things – or human values – these cannot save.

Authentic kingship brings with it what Austin Farrer called "The crisis of images": the *old* is broken open; the *new* arises. God's Love is sovereign, unending, unbeaten.....it is eternal.

Christ the King brings a different kingship altogether: *"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross."* (Colossians 1:19-20)

This is the hope God has brought for you and me, and for our world.

*"He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."* (Colossians 1:13-14)

*"May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, whilst joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light"* (Colossians 1:11-12)

Thanks be to God!

MMY, 21/11/10.