

Today is the last Sunday of the Christian year - a day referred to as the feast of 'Christ the King' and while I doubt that any of you manage our diaries according to the ecclesiastical calendar, there is something about the end of something that causes us to reflect not only on what is next, but the journey we've made thus far.

Nobody remembers the day they were born, probably because it's such a traumatic event, but I wonder if you've ever received a birthday card with the year of your birth and the events that happened in it. I was born in 1971, where the average weekly wage was about £32. You could buy a new mini for just £600, and a house could be bought for under £5000.

Charley and the chocolate factory was shown for the first time in the cinema, and the biggest song in the charts was John Lennon's 'Imagine'. Edward Heath was prime minister and the microprocessor was invented.

I imagine that if we were to look at all the things that happened the year, we were born we'd discover some very interesting events.

The celebration of church New Year only goes back to 1925 when the feast day was proclaimed by Pope Pius IX.

And 1925 was a very interesting time in the world. We had only just emerged from the war that was supposed to end all wars, and yet there were already signs that we were racing towards another one.

We were in the grip of a worldwide economic depression, and desperately looking for answers 2 leaders emerged believing they had them.

They were Mussolini, and Adolf Hitler.

The world was watching, and waiting for answers, listening to these powerful men competing for the limelight, and so it was that the Pope felt it was time to remind Christians everywhere that our allegiance is to Christ and not to any worldly rulers.

Today, we are not on the brink of world war, but we are still watching and looking for answers. As we approach the general election, we will hear the voices of those who would fight for our votes and buy for our attention...

But there is another voice who longs to speak and be heard.

To the Galatians he writes, "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons and daughters. And because we are sons and daughters, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, whereby we can cry, "Abba! Father!" more literally 'Daddy'.

The promises in these four verses are that when God redeems, he secures us forever. He never forgets or forsakes his own children, but desires and offers us intimacy...a deep, personal and satisfying friendship with a heavenly Father who knows us thoroughly, who loves us continually and unconditionally.

The only thing that the thief did was to honour the King and for that he was able to look forward to a future that he couldn't even begin to imagine.

And so, as we say farewell to this ecclesiastical year, beginning a new one with the Advent/Christmas season along with all the joy and business that comes with it, let's take a look at where we began, how far we've come, but also to where we are going....

For it's not only a time to celebrate Jesus' birth, but also to consider his return. A date that none of us know, but, one which we should eagerly await and live as if it were happening tomorrow.

Jesus has made the same promise to us as he did to that thief on the day he was born again, the day when everything changed for him, the day when the King of Kings called him Son. Jesus is still the same Messiah, the same King and the same ruler now as he was then.

So, as we journey from one year onto another may we be mindful of what the birth of Jesus meant to the world then, and what it means to the world today. So, as we celebrate his birth afresh, may we also recall our own second birth into his kingdom, and celebrate it by living lives which honour the king, not to get into heaven but in gratitude for and in anticipation of being given in heaven.

Amen

But there is another voice who longs to speak and be heard.

There was a preacher in 19th century who, in the vestry one Sunday morning, heard that the King would be present at worship. Understandably rattled he ditched his well-prepared sermon and spoke on and on about the Christian virtues of their King.

Even though the King said nothing after the service the preacher could not help but wonder if he would receive some reward for his loyal support, and sure enough, a very large crate was delivered to the Church.

Immediately the priest concluded that his reward had arrived. He pried open the crate only to find a life-sized crucifix inside. He could hardly contain his disappointment.

"We've got lots of crucifixes already," he thought. But as he looked inside the crate, he saw a letter under the royal seal. Excitedly he opened it. The letter contained the king's instructions as to the placement of the crucifix in the Church. It was to go on the western wall so that the preacher would always be reminded of which king he should be speaking about.

In our gospel reading we revisit the scene of Jesus' crucifixion and its fitting that the church year ends on such a passage.... to remind us maybe of the reason why we are here.

As Jesus was going through that horrific event, he didn't forget who he was. The sign above his cross wasn't for his benefit for Jesus didn't need the soldiers to tell him he was the king of the Jews. He knew that he was the king of all kings.

I'm sure we've all heard the saying, that 'It's not what you know, but who you know,' These words aren't in the bible, but the truth they contain can be seen all through its pages.

I don't have children as you know, but I have watched my sister, and other parents who even though they may be talking to someone, important change their priorities when their child draws near with that certain face, or voice. Why? Because influence flows from intimacy and access from relationship.

In today's society people are so often drawn to the power and prestige of a metaphorical throne, they devote their energies towards receiving anything they can from the hands of the one in power...even though there is nothing that brings them together. How often have we heard the saying that, "It's a dog eat dog world."

I don't think that because we Christians were any better, for how often do we come to God in prayer as if we are putting coins into a slot machine hoping that he will bless us or give us what we want. "God if you just do this one thing for me then I'll..."

The gospel reading today simply reads that when they came to the place called the 'Skull', they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his left and one on his right.

Today criminals could mean anything, but let me tell you these were vile people.

They were men who lived in, and for the worst of sin. People who got their living from the misery of others, people who thrived from robbing, stealing, and murdering

We might wonder then why the writers of the gospel's such people the time of day?

Why is the thief there? Why, in such a holy moment when the King of Kings is about to die do, we find Luke writing about a vile man like this?'

It's there to show us that we can't work our way to heaven. We can't do enough to get into heaven. We can't say a little prayer to get us there because it's not all about that. It's not about reading our Bible's to get points. It's not about being holy, all that comes as a result of us being in a friendship with the king of kings. No matter how much we look in ourselves for salvation, were wasting our time! That's why the story of the criminal who got into heaven from the cross is there.

The trouble is, the world has taught us to earn, that we must earn praise and affirmation from our parents, that we earn grades by hard study, that we earn what we get by what we do, and so often that includes love.

It's most probable that we even learned how to earn before we learned how to talk or walk.

But our inclination for earning paralyzes us before God's offer of grace, because we cannot earn it.

the trouble is, we find it so difficult to leave behind that mindset and subtly or not, we trade away the gift of the gospel because we prefer to work for and serve God as slaves rather than believe that because of what he has already done we are Sons and daughters, brothers and sister of our Lord Jesus.

This was so important that we find Paul writing about it throughout the New Testament, I guess they struggled to get it just like we do.