

**CHRIST THE KING / LAST SUNDAY AFTER  
PENTECOST 21<sup>st</sup> November 2010**

**6.00pm Festal Evensong**

Readings: Deut. 17:14-20; Ps 46; 1 Corinthians 15:19-28

Carl Stecher, in an academic journal article said this: “The Bible is a product of primitive religious communities believing in an essentially anthropomorphic God, armed with supernatural powers....The Bible tells stories about this God revealing in Him some of the most unworthy human impulses and motives: favouritism, jealousy, anger, callousness to suffering, cruelty, even sadism. In fact, God reveals Himself to be very wicked...” He then proceeds to cite examples of the cruelty of this God: compelling Abraham, supposedly his favourite human, to sacrifice his son Isaac. The fact that it was only a test of Abraham’s faith makes it even more sadistic.

The mass-murdering, genocidal, tribal deity of the Bible, who made the earth and all its evil, is also supposed to be kind, merciful, good and loving. Stecher comes to the conclusion that the traditional idea of God is incoherent and unintelligible. “All that I have said ...should make clear why I am not a Christian, why I do not believe, indeed cannot believe, in the God of traditional Christianity” (Carl Stecher, “Searching for a Lost God”, *Sextant, The Journal of Salem College*, 1998, quoted in *Pulpit Resource*, Vol.38, No.4 Dec. 2010).

The recent spate of books by atheist writers such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins rely heavily on the argument that religion is the cause of most of the world’s problems, and that if we could eradicate its influence from the world for good, we’d be a whole lot better off. Many Christians are intimidated by such arguments, not knowing quite how to rebuff them.

Last Tuesday, clergy of the Diocese gathered for a professional development day at Wallsend. One of the presentations was given by the new Lecturer in Theology at the University of Newcastle, Dr Tim Stanley. He referred to Friedrich Nietzsche’s work, *The Gay Science*, in which Nietzsche put forth the idea that God is dead. Dr Stanley cleverly used the analogy of the great white shark, which when placed in captivity, will die fairly quickly. He used this as an analogy for the “God is dead” idea – when we try to keep God captive, when we try to contain the deity, we, in a sense kill God off.

By the time Nietzsche came along, atheism was not new. Hegel had already announced the modern world was “Good Friday without Easter Sunday.” Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin and others, all declared that religion is nothing but our human projection into a spiritual vacuum. Nietzsche agreed with this and came up with the person of the Madman. The Madman runs through the town square crying out, “I see God! I see God!” The people laugh at this crazy man as he announces, “Whither is God? ...I will tell you. We have killed him – you and I all of us are his

murderers... God is dead. God remains dead and we have killed him.”

The Madman was Nietzsche’s composite of all the writers who had killed God off. But he differed from them in one respect. Most of them, like the atheist writers today, saw the death of God and the decline of religion as positive sign of progress, of enlightenment and of liberation from external authority. Nietzsche viewed it all with great sadness. It was like he was a reluctant atheist. He saw a world without God as a place of chaos and the consequences would be devastating.

I read last week the suggestion that perhaps the recent thrust of the new atheist writers is not so much intellectual as political. The Feast of Christ the King was created in the Roman Catholic Church by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as a response to growing nationalism and secularism. It was a time when states were asserting their dominance over the world and when wars started by totalitarian regimes tore many places apart. The Church asserted in this feast that Jesus Christ is the ruler of the world. So this is a very political Sunday.

It’s not easy for modern people to recognise any authority greater than the sovereign self, the autonomous individual. To acknowledge Jesus as king is to say that the direction of the world and its authority belong to him.

But therein lies a danger. Jesus said his kingdom is not of this world. Not in the sense that it would only be realised after this world ends. It is not a kingdom like

others that rely on force and coercion and power and so on to achieve their ends. What is his Kingdom like? His kingdom is a kingdom of truth. When the Church proclaims “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again,” it’s making a declaration about the way this King reigns. The kingdoms of this world use power to control others (even democracies that constantly tell us how free we are, are based on systems of control through the media, business and the economy). The Kingdom Jesus brings is based on One who emptied himself of power and divested himself of glory by dying on a cross. The kingdoms of this world seek ways to postpone, deny or delay death by promising a utopian ideal built on accumulation and consumption of material goods. Jesus’ Kingdom recognises the transitory nature of such things (“do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth”) and builds its hope on his resurrection by which death is defeated and destroyed. The kingdoms of this world promise eternal life through consumerism. The Kingdom of God is eternal because Christ will come again.

Another characteristic of the Kingdom the Church proclaims and embodies is that it’s not based on a deficit mindset but an abundance mindset. Jesus, in many of his parables, talks about the lavish generosity of God. The sower wildly scatters seed on both good soil and bad. The master lavishes huge amounts of money on his servants. The invitations are sent out to a banquet where all are welcome and the food is laid on and the wine flows freely. So naturally the citizens of this Kingdom are to exhibit the same wild, extravagant, profligate

generosity that the King has shown. That will result in joy and laughter.

Modern atheism, not only the intellectual kind but the practical kind as well, i.e., the kind that says it believes in God but lives as if it doesn't, denies any reality outside the material, that which is palpable to our senses. The modern world, whether governed by a dictator or a democratically elected parliament, says look to us to provide security, meaning and self-worth; so obviously any modern state will be nervous at the suggestion that authority resides elsewhere. So we hear statements by politicians like, "Religion and politics don't mix." "The church should stay out of politics." Keep God, faith, religion private and personal. It's just another lifestyle option we're free to choose.

Christ the King says, "No!" The Church says, in the words of St Paul in our NT reading this evening, "For 'God has put all things in subjection under his feet.'" (1 Cor. 15:27). The state, the nation, the kingdoms of this world are not God. God rules over all. So we can't avoid bringing God into every area of our lives – not as a kind of guardian or policeman or cosmic parent who treats us like children, but who desires the best for us. The political powers felt threatened by Jesus from the time he was born. We'll hear again around Christmas time how Herod was nervous about the rumours of a new king to be born in Bethlehem. We'll hear about shepherds being the first to hear the news of Christ's birth. We'll hear at Epiphany about wise men bringing gifts fit for a king. Taken together, these stories bring a

politically inflammable statement about an inclusive, all-embracing kingdom that reverses the power structures we're used to. Jesus didn't offend people for teaching about the kingdom of heaven (there were many in Israel who longed for that); but the way his kingdom has implications for our lives right now.

A clever way to prevent Jesus having any influence is to relegate him to some vague private domain where he can't do any harm *or* any good. That leaves the powerbrokers of this world free to kill God off because God has been kept in captivity like the great white shark. Like Nietzsche, they may feel sad about that, seeing religious belief as having some value for the good of society. By contrast the gospel calls us to let Jesus loose, and as a result, to know the perfect peace and freedom that his Kingdom offers.