

A Battle for the Soul of Trump's World

A sermon preached at St Mary's Hadleigh on November 20th 2016 (Christ the King Sunday) by Canon Dr John Parr

The headline on the front page of one of last Monday's newspapers said it all. "May sets out Britain's stall for place in Trump's world". And underneath was a photo of one man who was clearly staking out his place: a beaming Nigel Farage, standing beside the President elect.

"Trump's world". Here's a clue to the way we see power. A billionaire leader of the world's strongest nation. And yet the same front page carried another story: "Tsunami alert after another earthquake hits Christchurch", in New Zealand. Not even Donald Trump's billions can match the power of nature.

Politicians. The wealthy. The media. Globalisation. Men. The metropolitan elites. The privately educated. The environment. "The people". Look through any newspaper, on any day of the week, and you'll see stories of the powerful, and the way they exercise their power.

Today is Christ the King Sunday. It's the end of the church's year, before the new one starts next week with Advent. Christ the King. What does that mean? What is a king these days?

His fans say Elvis is 'the king'. When I was a teenager supporting Manchester United, Denis Law was the Stretford End's king. Charles, William – these are next in line to be kings. Kings are about power and influence. Royalty has less actual power where there is a democratically elected government. But nation states too have less actual power in a world of global capital.

People may have voted to leave the EU because "we want our country back" so that we can repatriate our power from Brussels. But it's not quite so easy to rule our own roost when we're part of a complex, interconnected world.

Once upon a time Christians wielded the sword in the name of Christ, and ruled in much the same way as everyone else. Those who wanted to convert others to Christianity often went for their rulers first. Once the most powerful had been convinced, the rest would automatically follow.

That's how Christianity gained its privileged place in much of the world, and built many of its great buildings. Hardly by following the Servant King. And as the world's powerful ones now change places, so the church loses what it once had.

All four gospels tell us that Jesus was crucified under the inscription, "This is the king of the Jews" (Luke 23.38). It may have been cynicism on the part of his enemies, but the first Christians saw the irony in it, and took it as truth. They re-fashioned a symbol of oppression, weakness and humiliation into an image of freedom, glory and power.

The power that really matters. Power that makes a genuine difference to the lives of all who acknowledge it. Power that doesn't need to rely on wealth or the media or politicians or the educated to do its work. The true power of God, power that makes the world turn, paraded where we least expect it.

I believe that we are seeing a battle for the soul taking shape in our culture, in our world. What do I mean? Not some inner, spiritual, eternal part of us fighting against wicked materialism. Soul is what makes us who we are. What connects us to our deepest selves, to one another, to the natural world, to the ground of our being in God.

What is the soul of Trump's world? If the recent US election campaign is anything to go by, it's all about riding roughshod over people. And what is now called "post-truth" – influencing people by deliberately telling lies. Trump's world – but not only Trump's world – is also full of eye-watering inequality. At the Mayfair restaurant of the Michelin-starred TV chef Michel Roux, you might pay more than £60 for a starter. But some of its kitchen staff have been paid as little as £5.50 an hour – less than you'd earn at McDonald's, and well below the £7.20 national living wage. The restaurant does it because it can get away with it. "Roux has such a name he can do it," said one chef. "They are exploiting people". Roux's world. Trump's world.

What is the soul of the world that comes into being around the cross? Look at the way Luke paints his picture of Jesus' crucifixion. Abused, traumatised, exhausted as he is, his soul is undiminished. "Father, forgive them", as he looks across to those responsible for his execution. "Today you will be with me in Paradise", he says to one of the criminals crucified alongside him. "Into your hands I commit my spirit", as he breathes his last breath and entrusts himself to his heavenly Father. Despite all that he suffers, Jesus looks beyond himself, his faith and hope and forgiveness anything but exhausted.

According to St Luke, this is the power that really matters. The soul of a world in which people of every kind can become truly free to be fully human, the way God has made us.

In July this year, I went to a conference for clergy at St George's House, Windsor. Every day we worshipped in the royal chapel there. It was founded in 1348 by

Edward the Confessor as a place of prayer for the monarch and the Order of the Garter. Today St George's House helps the church to serve the wider community through the conferences it runs.

I have a confession to make. I'm not a raving royalist, and neither am I a republican. But my time at St George's opened my eyes to the importance of what the monarchy represents. The Queen has re-shaped the monarchy through her vocation to serve the nation and the Commonwealth, and through them the wider world. At Windsor I realised that what we call "the establishment" is not a bunch of crusty, privileged men and their friends, but a network of organisations and institutions that hold society together.

Monarchy, Church, the judiciary, the military – and much more. The voluntary sector. Schools and colleges. The NHS. The emergency services. Politics. Local government. And more – wherever people and organisations and institutions are governed by a spirit of service, and a desire to invest their resources in the common good, that's what I now understand by "the establishment".

In today's Old Testament reading (Jeremiah 23.1-6), the prophet Jeremiah longed for a world in which leaders were like shepherds who would feed the whole flock of God's people, with wisdom and justice. Leaders who breathed the spirit of service into the soul of society.

The desire to look beyond ourselves, to challenge inequality and unfairness, to welcome and include. The willingness to help the most vulnerable to develop a self-esteem that doesn't depend on what they look like, or how clever they are, or what they own. This is the soul of society, rooted in truth, not "post-truth".

Christ is King of this kind of world. Not even a cruel and brutal death can overcome his power to heal, to forgive, to trust - and to inspire others in his way. People of every kind, the world that you and I inhabit, really do come alive when we are shaped and governed by the just and gentle rule of Christ the King.

What could be more powerful than the forgiveness that takes hold of us, and shows us how to heal the past so that tomorrow can be a new day? What could be stronger than the love that draws us to God and turns enemies into friends, strangers into neighbours?

A battle for the soul. Are we content with Trump's world? Pray for grace that we may play our part in making it the world in which Christ is known to be King.