

Crumbling Empires and Eternal Bliss: Sermon Preached at St John's, Devizes, Sunday 21st November 2021 (Christ the King)

Readings – Revelation 1:4b-8; Mark 10:17–31

“My Kingdom is not from of this world.”

May I speak in the name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Some of you know, and some of you don't, that I am a very keen radio ham, and a particular enthusiast for Morse code, which is still in use by hobbyists around the world on a daily basis. My love affair with radio started when I was an eight year old boy, on discovering that the radio cassette player my parents had given me as a Christmas present had a switch marked “Short Wave”. At first, tuning the dial on this strange waveband was unpropitious, as the adults had all assured me would be the case, revealing only strange bleeps and noises and a few stations in languages I didn't even recognise.

Within a few hours, however, I had discovered programmes in immaculate English from Sweden, the Netherlands, and Czechoslovakia and things developed from there over the following weeks and months. To a child always fascinated by maps and already at that tender age becoming interested in politics, that cassette player became like a magic carpet to distant lands, so much more remote in those pre-Internet days of the 1980s.

One of the most ubiquitous stations, and certainly the most bizarre, was Radio Tirana, which dominated large parts of the Short Wave spectrum with its creepy and unforgettable theme tune, introducing broadcasts that promoted Albania's official state ideology in every language from Armenian to Zulu. It seemed to despise equally both what it described as American Imperialists and Soviet Socialist Imperialists, but its real ire was reserved for the oul' enemy – the imperialists of Yugoslavia.

The undoubted king of the dial, however, was Radio Moscow, which in English alone had not only a North American service, and a World Service aimed mainly at audiences in Africa and South Asia, but for an hour at 8 o'clock every evening

the wonderful Britain and Ireland Service. It was presented by gentlemen who were very well-spoken indeed, sounding like they had been educated at Marlborough and Cambridge – because they probably had been. They presented the failures of the Soviet Union as being the inevitable flaws of a system that was still merely Socialist, and that these would ultimately disappear as a perfect political system, a genuine Communism, inevitably emerged.

I discovered all this at Christmas 1985. Within a few years, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and even the mighty Soviet Union all vanished from our maps. Empires rise and fall. They always have done and always will do, and they are always profoundly flawed entities.

Yet the ideals of Communism represented hope for millions of even those who lived under it and knew its flaws. Indeed, it was an ideology of hope to me in my latter primary school and early secondary school years, increasingly aware that I lived in a grossly unequal society, and that I was growing up at the bottom of its social structure. As the Soviet Union started falling apart in the 1980s, the hope of millions of its citizens that their sacrifices had been worth bearing for the sake of a perfect society for their children and grandchildren started to fall apart too. Crime, drugs, and inequality all spiralled; bereft of hope, millions of men simply drank themselves to death in their fifties and sixties.

A different vision seized the Church in the Western world after the Second World War. It sought a new social order to ensure such a horror would never be repeated, not a Communist one, but one based on fair play, freedom, and co-operation between people of all social classes and political opinions, undergirded by a safety net for the poorest. Internationally, the United Nations would secure peace and make the world more equal and more harmonious. The Church of England not only embraced this vision but played a significant role in its emergence. It was a beautiful vision, and for a while it worked. I see the light that sparkles in many older parishioners' eyes when they talk about the Church of the 1960s, when all things were being made new, and optimism and ambition were boundless.

Over the last sixty years, the social order that made that vision possible started to fall apart. It didn't help that the Church lost faith in Christendom, and passed custodianship of the visions that undergird our common life to a secular, technocratic, élite. This élite told itself that as we now had access to knowledge and technology unimaginable to previous generations, countries would managed much more effectively than in the past, leading to happier people. The exact tool that would do this has changed over time, from psychology and social science in the 1960s, to free market economics in the 1980s, to big data today, but there is always some new piece of intellectual magic that is going to solve most of our problems. But we're not well governed and we're not happy either. In the United States, middle-aged men have started dying in big numbers through drink, drugs, and suicide, just as they did in the USSR as it began to collapse. Many of the same social fractures are visible in this country and across Western Europe, albeit with mercifully fewer guns in circulation. This is a worrying time, and I have little doubt the 2020s are going to be a bumpy decade indeed.

This is the sort of time in which empires rise, and empires fall.

So where do we find hope in this fractured and frightening world? There are three things I commend to you. Firstly, remind yourself what sort of king that Jesus Christ was. Pontius Pilate represented one of the greatest empires that has ever existed, one that still influences the way we think today and which brought peace and order to tens of millions for centuries. Yet, as we heard in today's Gospel reading, it was often a nastily cynical society, with a ruling class trained to believe casual brutality was a necessary tool of government. Despite all his power, Pontius Pilate is remembered today only because of the man he casually had put to death, the strange provincial preacher with the thick Galilean accent, who could have summoned twelve legions of angels to seize power but chose not to. Seizing power does not ensure the power to transform the world as one sees fit. The great dictators' of the 20th Century – Hitler, Stalin, and Mao – all wrecked their countries and left no meaningful political legacy: remember that China's success of the last forty years has been based on a repudiation of most of what Mao believed. In contrast, the crucified King of the Cross is worshipped

by billions today, with the citizens of His kingdom so diverse, dispersed, and decentralised that it is hard to imagine any earthly power being able to destroy the Church.

Secondly, why not read the Book of Revelation? Just sit down and read it one go. Don't dismiss it as the ravings of an ancient drug addict as too many do. I acknowledge that it is quite bonkers in places. That's alright. No true vision of the heavenly realms could be written down in a way that seemed entirely sane. It points us towards a destiny where the world is almost destroyed through human folly, yet a perfect social order is finally established on earth when Christ returns, and the whole created order is redeemed by God in the end. Part of the sickness of our society is that we lack any transcendent vision, instead being reduced to being items in the datasets of supposed experts whom we increasingly mistrust. Revelation's portrait of heaven might be what a world of COVID and climate change needs.

Thirdly, let's be honest about what the Church can and can't do. The post-War project of the Church of England and most of the Western Church is dead. Even if it remained feasible, which I doubt it is in this radically individualistic society, we lack both the numerical strength and the cultural influence to make it possible. That doesn't mean it was wrong in its time, just that times have changed. The Church of England has spent much of the last forty years trying to resurrect consent for the paternalistic big state of the post-War era – well, if the Christian minister is no longer trusted to know what's best, then the man from the ministry is not much more so. We have lost our moral authority; nobody much outside our pews and few enough in them are interested in what bishops think about gay marriage, or Dominic Cummings, or Brexit. Those days are over. What we can do is love and serve the people around us. That's why I'm so glad to have Clare here this morning from Home for Good to talk about adoption, fostering, and how we can all support children in care when we encounter them. For the service of those who are most vulnerable is often the smoothest highway to the kingdom of God.

In a world where empires, ideologies, and communities seem to be disintegrating, I think this might be a vision of hope for the Church: to love and serve in the name of the prophet who rejected earthly power and so was proclaimed King of the Universe, straining towards that vision of eternal bliss promised to us by the Book of Revelation.

Now to the only wise God our saviour, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.