

Christ the King, 11/22/09 Grinnell, St. Paul's, Rev. Sallie Verrette

Today, we celebrate the Day of Christ the King. There was a time when this Sunday had another name—it was called stir up Sunday. In the 1928 and older prayer books, the collect for the day began:

Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people....

So the day was called Stir Up Sunday because it was also the day that the Christmas pudding should be stirred up and cooked so that it would be properly aged by Christmas day.

For some reason, this particular piece of trivia really pleased me. It made wonder why I like learning about irrelevant things like that and that thought led me to remember Lewis Carroll's poem about the Walrus and the Carpenter and this verse:

“The time has come,” the Walrus said,
“To talk of many things:
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing -wax—

Of cabbages—and kings—
And why the sea is boiling hot—
And whether pigs have wings.”

The Walrus gives equal value to everything—cabbages are as worthy a topic as kings and it’s just as okay to talk about something quite evidently not true such as pigs having wings and the sea being boiling hot.

However, I disagree with Mr. Walrus.

For all our lives it is essential to learn to sort out what is and what is not important. It’s not so important that this is stir-up Sunday but it is important to be invited to stir up our wills so that we will “plenteously bring forth the fruit of good works”. As we enter the holiday season there will be many demands on our time and we need to discern what is important and what is not. In the academic community, it is a particularly crowded time because Advent coincides with the end of the semester, which involves the giving and taking of exams, the writing and

reading of papers, activities that inevitably create tension. For everyone there is a crowded schedule of parties, special concerts and plays, shopping, special food to prepare and on and on.

Now I am going to make a big jump to today's readings. Beginning with Daniel's vision, there is some spectacular imagery—the throne of fiery flames, wheels of fire, a stream of fire flowing out from the Ancient One's presence. The "one like a human being" comes on a cloud and his kingship will never be destroyed. In Psalm 93, the Lord is King, with splendid apparel, he is mightier than the breakers of the sea. In Revelation, again he comes on the clouds and there is no doubt as to his power "I am the Alpha and Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

The tone in the passage from John is so different. Unlike the God of the apocalyptic visions, Jesus is plainly dressed, he usually goes by foot—in short, he looks like everyone else.

Jesus seeks to make Pilate and the others that his kingdom, his dignity, his power are not from this world. Pilate asks him “So you are a king?” Pilate can only understand one kind of king, a worldly king, who seeks power and dominion but who does not love the people he subjugates, who puts himself first. Jesus understands this about Pilate, so he doesn’t argue, he merely replies “You say that I am a king.” But then he goes on to state his mission. He was born and came into the world to testify to the truth. “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” I imagine Jesus here as quiet, determined, and sure. Pilate is without question puzzled and unable to understand. Since he doesn’t understand, or can’t hear, he does not belong to the truth. None of what Jesus says makes sense to him—Jesus might as well be talking about the sea being boiling hot, or pigs having wings. The Walrus in Carroll’s poem is very dignified, but he appears to have no sense of discrimination. It is just as important to talk about a cabbage as it is to talk about a king. One thing is as good as another—shoes, ships, sealing wax, whatever. You may remember that the Walrus and the Carpenter are followed by a large number of oysters

who are sitting in a row listening. With indifference to their suffering, the Walrus and the Carpenter eat every one, every last oyster. And when they say that it is time to go home, there was no answer because there were no oysters. They don't seem to have a clue as to what has really happened. And I don't believe that Pilate or the Romans around him or the Jews who did not follow Christ, who did not follow the Way offered to them by God, had a clue as to what they were doing, or what was really going to happen.

The dignity and calm that comes from Jesus in this scene is awe-inspiring. We know that he has suffered greatly through the night in the garden of Gethsemane. He knows that what is happening now is planned and has a purpose. Jesus understands and knows too well the indifference and lack of understanding on the part of those who will crucify him. That is why, at the last, he is able to say "Forgive them for they know not what they do."

But we are getting ahead of the story—we will deal with those events as we proceed through the church year. But for now, we are ending the church year and preparing for the new one. Christ the King Sunday marks the last Sunday before Advent. And Advent really marks the beginning of our new year.

So this is the right time to stir up our wills, the wills of all the faithful, so that we will plenteously bring forth the fruit of good works. May the Lord keep us safe from indifference to the suffering in the world, and may he strengthen our powers of discernment, so that we know the difference between cabbages and kings, the difference between good and evil. As we end this church year and begin another, let us resolve to use our powers of discernment to stir up the energies we need to be our best, to do our best. Let's go home and stir up a Christmas pudding that will bring good cheer and love to all near and dear to us, all the while remembering those far away who suffer for us in the distant lands of Iraq and Afghanistan.