

TUESDAY COMMUNION

Two kings - with very different agendas

Hymn:

Reading: Acts 17. 1-10a

Prayers:

Last Tuesday afternoon I was in The Dome for our university Carol Service. Our splendid ecumenical chaplain, Ingrid, had decided that I should read Matthew's story of the Wise Men.

Sometimes we call them "kings" as in that glorious carol "Three Kings from Persian lands afar" which stirs the imagination of Kings from the East travelling vast distances to greet the new-born king of the Jews.

But, in reality it is two other kings who are at the heart of that story.

The first king is Herod who is the puppet king established by the Romans and who will stop at nothing to preserve his wealth and limited power.

The second king is the child who dwells in Bethlehem. The two kings never come face to face though when the child has grown to be a man he will stand before Pontius Pilate, who represents the power and authority of this world.

The relationship of Jesus to this world has never been easy or comfortable and in this age never will be. We see the tension in our reading from Acts. Paul, who we often call "the apostle to the gentiles", actually has as great a concern for his own Jewish people as for the rest of humanity.

Luke notes that "as was his custom" when Paul arrives at the chief city of Thessalonica he goes to the synagogue both to worship and to speak of Jesus who Paul calls "Messiah".

For Jewish people in that day the "Messiah" was a somewhat in-precise figure who God sends to be both priest and king. He is the one who gathers up all their longings both in terms of their relationship with God and the way they live together in community in this world.

We should not be surprised that some found it impossible to accept that a crucified carpenter represented such a person. Nor should we be surprised that they latched on to Paul's declaration that Jesus was the Messiah to suggest that Paul was claiming him as a rival to Caesar.

It was an astute move and there was soon uproar in the Thessalonica.....

As we pass through this season of Advent we are looking forward to the coming of one who disturbs our peace. In this, Herod and the mob in Thessalonica were certainly right! He may not come to claim worldly power for himself but he places a

question mark over the way we live, the values we hold, our hopes for today and tomorrow.

Paul going to the synagogue of his own people reminds us that the first people who need to be challenged by the coming of Jesus are those who bear his name. What does it mean for Christians to hear once again that Jesus is our Messiah, our priest and king? If, in some measure, he does not disturb us, if he does not make us ask questions, if he does not challenge us, then perhaps we have failed to meet with him.

If he comes as the one who reveals the love of God then he asks us, "What does it mean to love ourselves, to desire our own well-being:

- to love those to whom we are most closely bound:- family, friends, church:
- and to love the people of this world with whom we share the privilege of being daughters and sons of God."

As a nation and as part of the continent of Europe we are sailing through stormy seas. I have a deep gut instinct that it would help us chart our course in these dangerous times if we allowed the king who is born in a stable to shape our vision for the future and the way we turn hope into a reality. The wisdom of the rulers of this world needs to be transformed by an encounter with the wisdom of God.....

And it begins, in our own hearts and in the way of life in our own Christian communities.....

Amen