

St Stephen's: 25th November, 2012 Feast of Christ the King

The Feast of Christ the King is mind-blowing in what it puts before you. Christ is not just King of your life and mine, he is King of the Cosmos. So it needs grounding. I'm going to ground it in the Lord's Prayer, which most of us say daily, with the suggestion that living the Lord's Prayer can turn upside-down our lives and bring them closer to the Kingdom of Christ the King. That's where we're going.

I want to begin with a film ~ I wonder if you know it? 'The Matrix'? A lot of it is about perception. The underlying premise of the film is: Nothing in the world is quite what it seems. The story is that machines have taken over the world, and they have humans hooked up to the Matrix, a vast network that makes us think that we are eating and working and getting married and doing all the things we do in everyday life, when in fact we are in a sort of suspended animation whilst the machines harvest us for energy. One of the main characters, Morpheus, disrupts the Matrix for a short time and gives another character, Neo, a choice: He can take a red pill and learn the truth about his existence – that everything he sees around him isn't real, and he's really hooked up to a machine -- or he can take a blue pill and go back to his life of blissful ignorance. Morpheus says: "This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill - the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill - you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes." Do we want reality? Do we, on this feast of Christ the King, want the reality of the Kingdom of God, which can turn things, disturbingly, upside-down?

The Lord's Prayer, which many of us pray at least once a day, can be like the blue or the red pill. You take the blue pill, and you just say the Lord's Prayer, much as you've always done. It is reassuring and its very familiarity, as words hallowed down the centuries, gives us a sense that, beyond the changes and chances of this fleeting world, all is well. And so it is. I really do believe that Mother Julian was right when she said: "All shall be well, and all shall be well; and all manner of things shall be well." But there are things we need to be prepared to do, to work with God to make things well. It won't just happen! So, if you take the red pill it raises questions. You are praying to your ultimate King ~ and yet you are bidden, by Jesus, to call him, 'Daddy' ~ and not just you alone, but we must all say, 'Our Father', accepting, as we say those words, that all other people are, effectively, brothers and sisters with us. Not just the ones we like ~ or the 'people like us'. Everyone! So God's Kingship leads us, you might say, into making a real and working thing of our kin-ship with each other. This is, frankly, difficult ~ so the blue pill is an easier option! To be brother or sister to someone quite different from me, who irritates me almost beyond endurance, is a common family experience. Most families not only survive it, they grow to thrive on it. But multiply those differences many times over, and it is much easier to play the old game of insiders and outsiders; insiders (who know what's right, and support each other) and outsiders (who are ~ well, beyond the pale!). The red pill of God's reality, however, tells us otherwise. And it's red-pill reality that we pray for when we pray, 'Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in Heaven.' We are praying something like: "With the wounded power of your Kingship turn-upside-down our broken kin-ship, so that we let go the ever-tempting ego-trip and, as fellow pilgrims, as beggars who know where there is bread, help each other, as brothers and sisters, make it through the night of doubt and sorrow." It is tempting again to choose the blue pill, as we reach: 'Give us this day our daily bread', so that we can take a deep breath and say: "Now look here, God: when

it comes to daily bread, there are some things I simply must have.” And then off we go into a shopping list. But that’s called ‘greed’, isn’t it? For the red pill of God’s Kingly-reality let’s look back to the life of Jesus. That’s always a good thing to do. Jesus lived with real people, just as we do. They said a lot of things about Jesus, by no means all complimentary. One particularly juicy phrase sticks out: he was, they said, ‘a glutton and a wine-bibber’. You can just see Jesus’ opponents rolling that one round their tongues with relish. But do you know where the phrase comes from? It’s a quotation from Deuteronomy 21, in which the Israelites are told what to do with a stubborn and rebellious son. It is not a nice passage. The parents are to bring him to the elders of the town, and say: “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a wine-bibber.”, and they must stone him to death. Gosh! So, you see, there was more to the charge against Jesus than just that he went to too many parties! It was a way of saying, ‘He is being profoundly disloyal to our traditions; he deserves to die.’ But Jesus was following the agenda he set out in the Lord’s Prayer. He wasn’t a rebellious son, rather, he was loyal to the King whom he called ‘Daddy’. And so, ~ look a little more deeply ~, his eating and drinking with his motley collection of friends was a deliberate sign of the Kingdom: the great festive banquet which God has prepared for his people. That picture goes back to the vision of the land flowing with milk and honey; to the Psalmist, saying: ‘Thou shalt prepare a table before me, in the presence of my foes’. Jesus’ parties, and his feeding of his followers in the wilderness, were intended, for those with eyes to see, to pick up this whole theme and celebrate it. Why then did they criticise him? I’ll tell you: Because he was celebrating the feast of the Kingdom with all the wrong people! ‘Give us this day our daily bread’, effectively, means ‘let the party continue!’ ~ as it is, including all those wrong people!

So, as we ‘stir-up’ ourselves and prepare, during Advent, to celebrate what could be called God’s dimension coming to birth within ours, we must lift our eyes beyond just our own needs. One suggestion is that, when you come to receive the sacrament, bring with you, in heart and mind, someone you know who desperately needs God’s bread, literally or metaphorically, today. Bring them with you. Let them kneel, in your mind’s eye, with you at the altar rail. And as you return, strengthened by God’s food, ask yourself what this new friend would mean when he or she prays, ‘Give me this day my daily bread’. Then ask how you might be part of God’s answer to that prayer. And part of the answer might be through giving and accepting forgiveness, as the Lord’s Prayer bids us do. (but that’s another sermon)

So there we are. Pope Pius XI established the Feast of Christ the King in 1925 to repudiate systems that were gaining strength against Christ’s kingdom early in the 20th Century; systems like secularism and domination of the church by atheistic Communism. But other systems – such as consumerism, materialism and individualism– can stand against the kingdom of Christ in our own time. Let us live as we pray, together, for that Kingdom: Our Father +