

Christ the King 2020

King Edmund stood within his walls and, mindful of the Saviour, threw down his weapons, desiring to imitate the example of Christ who forbade Peter to fight with weapons against the bloodthirsty soldiers. Then, those wicked men (the Danes) bound Edmund, insulted him shamefully and beat him with clubs. Then they led the faithful king to a tree, tied him to it with hard ropes and scourged him, while with true faith he called between blows on Jesus Christ. The heathen were mad with rage... and made him a target for their arrows. Then Hingwar (the Dane leader) saw that... Edmund continued to call upon Christ with steadfast faith, so he ordered his men to behead him. While he was still calling upon Christ, the heathen drew away the saint and with one blow struck off his head; and so his soul departed joyfully to Christ.

St Edmund used to be the patron saint of England and many believe he should be again – he was after all a true English King and Martyr. King Athelstan built the first Monastery to St Edmund way back in 902 AD at the place we today call Bury St Edmunds. We have an ancient medieval wall painting of St Edmund in the Lady Chapel at Boxford Church. You should come and see it sometime. What is more, being the patron saint of pandemics, we could do worse than to ask him for his intercession at this troubled time. Why not pop in to Boxford Church when it is open for private prayer and pray before his image?

On Friday, we commemorated the Feast Day of St Edmund, King of the East Angles, and the biography that we heard a moment ago was taken from the commonly revered writings of Aelfric of Eynsham. Edmund, of course, is widely regarded to have laid the foundations for much of the Christian richness that blessed East Anglia once the Danes were finally repelled. But Edmund's story begs the question of what kind of kingdom believers in Christ are called to advance. After all, the kingdom over which Edmund ruled suffered greatly immediately after his martyred death. But then, there was something about his legacy that provided the pillars for a remarkable Christian witness to spring up just a century or so later.

It is rather fitting then, that St Edmund's Feast Day should fall just a few days before the Feast of Christ the King, which we celebrate today. The Feast of Christ the King encourages us to think about what kind of kingdom it is that we desire to inherit, if we are being truly faithful to Christ's witness? What is the kingdom that Christ comes to build?

Well, we can only begin to answer this question by examining his witness. And as we examine that witness, we see that sacrifice and holiness are two constitutive factors of his ministry. It seems to me that, all of his teaching and example serve to reinforce the importance of these two things. It is no surprise then, that the periods of great revival in the church are always accompanied by an ability in Christians to engage in real human issues and a dedication and care to prayer and worship – and as a mark of this monasticism thrives during these times too.

There is much talk in the wider Church today about mission and evangelism. For decades, the Church has been obsessed with encouraging the kind of practice that can produce short-term gains in order to get bums on pews. Numbers are, of course, important if the Church is to survive in many of our communities. But despite no lack of new initiatives in recent years they don't appear to have resulted in long-term commitment and faith in the vast majority: numbers haven't held up and decline has continued across the Church. But maybe that is because, in its apparent panic and desperation, the Church has put its energies into the wrong things. An occasional 'modern' service or new kind of worship is great as an addition to add a little joy, but it will never grow the kind of conviction and desire necessary to encourage a life-long commitment to faith.

An evangelising community is a community that models itself on Christ. It is a sacrificial community that is willing to give of itself and actively seek out ways to serve others and devote itself to Christ in prayer. Service and devotion being two sides of the coin of holiness. An evangelising community speaks the gospel through words and deed into the daily lives of real people. It bridges divides between rich and poor, between the healthy and the suffering, between the revered and the despised. It is willing to put itself in danger and embraces human life wherever it may be found. In so doing, it touches the flesh of Christ to be found in the real suffering of others. The evangelising church is willing to be found in with the sheep, searching out the lost and binding up the wounded.

If our church has become a cosy club of apparently safe people, people just like us, then maybe we need to ask ourselves if our church is still a church at all, or is it just a gentrified country club? Maybe, Christ's kingdom will be found less amongst those who are comfortable and have already 'made it' and more in the midst of the teenagers in the church porch or the single parent in the council estate or the homeless person in the doorway. Maybe his kingdom will be found

with the prisoner or the refugee or the drug addict or the person trapped in the grips of modern-day slavery.

But if we are to get this right, and not just add another superficial act to other endless short-term superficial acts, then we need to learn from the example of Christ our King. Incarnation, as we see it in the person of Jesus Christ, naturally involves embodiment, God in human form, God literally being down to earth. Christ understands the inside and outside of human encounters and it is here that we will find the living and breathing of the Living God. Jesus is able to so empty himself as to provide complete self-sacrificial service to the whole of humankind, only because of the closeness of his relationship to the Father. Likewise, we must constantly work at moving closer to God the Father too, so that we can operate from a place of complete self-sacrifice void of all the usual self-interest and pride that so often drives even our best endeavours. Our goal is to become Christ-like - serving others whilst retaining our Godly core.

Just like Christ our King, our ministry and calling is an incarnational one, and our love and devotion of God brings us literally down to earth. In the messiness of our world we find the flesh of Christ and thus our gateway to heaven.

Amen.