Bridge of Allan - Christ the King

21st November, 2015

It’s good to be here with you on the Feast of Christ the King – which I know that you mark as a Patronal Festival and on which you celebrate the life of your congregation. And there is much to celebrate for this congregation is known as one which has shaped its building as a place of prayer and where there is life and energy in the reach of the congregation into the community in which you are set.

It also happens to be the start of Scottish Interfaith Week and I shall be going from here to Edinburgh to represent our church at the opening event. You will know that the Scottish Episcopal Church – and indeed Dom himself – has an honourable record in promoting and shaping inter-faith relationships. You won’t know that recently I and other leaders of faith communities in Scotland were invited by the First Minister to sit at the Cabinet Table in Bute House to discuss the place of our diverse faith communities in Scotland. I think that the First Minister was trying to shape the way in which diverse faith communities can embody and represent the diversity of Scotland.

More important than all that is the moment in time at which we meet – a moment when Islamic Jihadist terrorism is mounting an unprecedented challenge to the peace and well-being of our world.

And the themes of today meet in our celebration of Christ the King.

We shall give ourselves during Scottish Interfaith Week to well-meaning building of relationships and understanding of one another in our diverse faith communities. But in the wider community, there will inevitably be a growth in Islamophobia as people try to find a framework of meaning which will help them to understand the tragedy of Paris and the events in Mali. Blame and fear are usually the most tempting answers to questions which don’t have ready answers.

Governments too will try to find answers – answers which will seem to offer protection to their populations and answers which look as if they might do something to reduce the scale of the threat. So Francois Hollande has said that France will be merciless. There will be much debate – and possibly a vote – in the House of Commons about whether or not we should bomb Syria. We risk being sucked into what Canon Giles Fraser called during the week a cycle of ‘mimetic violence’ – a violence which mirrors the violence of others. While that may provide some passing sense of satisfaction, I doubt if many of us believe that that in itself will solve the problem.

There is of course a connection between our reading from Daniel 7 – ‘His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed’ – and the words of Jesus to Pilate, ‘If my Kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my Kingdom is not from here.’

The core challenge of the Gospel in these moments is of course Jesus’ teaching that we should love our enemies. During last week, Archbishop Rowan Williams delivered a lecture in memory of George Orwell – in which he suggested that to love our enemies is not a matter of having ‘sentimental illusions that all you had to do was to be nice to people’

More serious is the risk that we may lose our own humanity in reaching for seductively easy – and violent – responses to vicious terrorism. Rather he suggested that we have to continue to attempt to understand our enemies – to ‘imagine the other’. That challenge is that of ‘imagining the unimaginable mentality of somebody who thinks that God or justice or the future .. is honoured by slaughter and barbarity.’

You may pick up in the way I talk of this that these are familiar themes for me. The use of religion to legitimise hatred and division is only another expression of the sectarianism which stains the life of both Ireland and Scotland. It is tempting – but misleading – to talk of mindless violence. It simply invites us to turn on our anger responses and turn off our thinking responses.

So this is a critical moment for us as disciples of Jesus Christ – and for us as citizens of a diverse society who wish to continue to live in harmony and mutual respect. Our celebration of Christ the King is a celebration of a Kingdom which transcends natural human reflexes of anger and vengeance and substitutes values of love, suffering and sacrifice. It is clear that life is going to change – some of the petty intrusions which became familiar in Northern Ireland are going to become common for us too as part of what may make us just that little bit safer. But what must not change is our essential humanity – particularly that part of our humanity which expresses our discipleship as the followers of Jesus Christ – who said firmly that his kingdom was not of this world.