

Matthew 2, 1-12; 1 John 3, 1-5

I wonder if any of you have ever met a King or Queen? Some years ago my now teenage son Barnaby was rolling through Windsor Great Park on his first wooden balance bike. Having got a bit over-confident he ended up in something of a heap in the middle of the road near Bishopsgate. An approaching range rover came to halt, waiting patiently as my wife Alice went to the rescue, and having bundled up Barnaby and his bike she looked up to give a wave of thanks to the driver – you can imagine her surprise, when Queen Elizabeth II waved back.

We may never meet an earthly monarch but one day we will meet a heavenly one. So what kind of King is our Lord Jesus Christ; Isaiah tells us ‘his government will have no end and nor will his peace’ and as Carol said in her sermon at the celebration of Christ the King, his rule contradicts our worldly perception of power, privilege and authority. That subversion of rule, law and tradition can be applied to virtually every aspect of his earthly existence; He re-writes the laws of biology, physics and nature – he was born to a virgin, he calmed a storm and walked on water, he turned a few fish into a feast for thousands and instantly healed those with life-long afflictions.

So why is it, in spite of being so aware of this ruler with infinite power, why do we still follow our own rules. In his book ‘Hidden Christmas’, chapters from which Rev. Jon has given as inspiration for these advent sermons, Tim Keller asks this very question; as he puts it, ‘why can we not concentrate on the most glorious person possible? Why, is there still a little King Herod inside each one of us?’ As we shall sing in a moment we go through the hopes and fears of all the years, and whilst God will always hear our prayer do those prayers sometimes become something of a wish list based on our own agenda, rather than his.

In trying to comprehend this dilemma, Keller cites Romans, chapter 7 - ‘I do not understand what I do, For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do.’ The answer to a large degree is that, along with all his gifts and blessings, God has also given us free will. We have a choice, in everything we do. So how do we reconcile this unending desire to do our own will, even when we know it is not His?

Our reading from 1 John joyfully states ‘See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called Children of God! And that is what we are.’ – When a child learns to walk, those first steps may be decidedly wobbly and uncertain, they may only travel a matter of inches, but that does not stop their parents’ hearts from bursting with love, pride and encouragement. In the same way, if with that gift of free will, we keep choosing to step towards God - like a child, those steps maybe uncertain, they may sometimes be in slightly the wrong direction and we will keep falling over - but that does not stop our heavenly father from responding with precisely the same love, pride and encouragement.

It is, in fact, because of our weakness that God works through us - As Keller points out, He chose David not Goliath, He chose Rebekah who couldn't have children, He chose Nazareth rather than Jerusalem. And ultimately of course, Christ himself becomes weak and helpless to pay the price for our salvation.

We are all that child Dolapo talked about so powerfully on the first Sunday of Advent; who rather than being punished for the mess they have made, are given a clean sheet to try again. So what do we do with that clean sheet of paper? Well, a pretty sure-fire way of doing God's will rather than our own is, of course, to consider others – to love our neighbour as ourself.

Driving to work a few weeks ago, there was an item on the news describing how 80% of Britain's older churches 'provide vital sanctuary for bats as their natural habitats decrease'. Now, as we all know, Rev Jon has grappled with this issue in considerable depth for some time, so my first thought was to wonder whether he was listening to the same radio station, and if he was, whether he had picked up the weighty and over-sized Transforming Trinity bat file, and hurled at the radio - of course such behaviour would be totally out of character.

That phrase 'vital sanctuary' really stayed with me. How can this building and those of us who worship in it, provide vital sanctuary for our fellow human beings (as well as bats)? The latin derivation of those words is important – Sanctus meaning Holy and vitalis meaning Life. Holy Life – that might sound rather grand and unattainable, and as such, I think, represents one of the most common misconceptions, amongst people who have yet to find their faith - that those of us who have, are endlessly holy, are somehow superior, that we have all the answers, and never put a foot wrong. To dispel such myths, to instead make it very clear that it is precisely because we know we are weak and flawed that we walk through those doors - and backed up with Christ's powerful words 'I did not come for the righteous' – that is the Holy Life, that is providing vital sanctuary.

In this season of Advent we remember how, some 2000 years ago, someone chose to provide vital sanctuary to a woman who was about to go into labour. All they could offer was a stable and a manger, a humble birthplace for the king of kings. We believe that that king will come again, that as I said the beginning, one day we will meet him; so rather than just these few weeks, our whole lives are actually one, long Advent. To quote 1 John again '.. when Christ appears, we shall be like him, we shall see him as he is.' So with faith in that promise, surely the least we can do is choose to gently share it. In doing so, we take another tentative step towards our father and, at the same time, give the greatest gift of all and that, in spite of all our failings, is the gift of hope. Amen.

Michael Grist, 14 December 2025

