

Hymns: **67** **“This, this is the God we adore”**
 534 **“Eternal God, we praise you love”**
 56 **“King of Glory, King of Peace”**
 255 **“The Kingdom of God is justice and joy”**
 185 **“Sing we the King who is coming to reign”**

Readings: **Luke 23:33-43**
 Colossians 1:11-20

“THE DIVINE RIGHTS OF A KING”

I’ve just come across a bundle of documents that date back to the beginnings of my life as a Christian. I’d written to the Catholic Enquiry Centre for their introductory leaflets and, one at a time, in plain brown envelopes, they plopped through the letterbox. All 21 of them between March 13th 1962 and August 4th of that same year.

I was 20 and in search of faith.

In my teenage years, I’d attended a tiny church and even been a Sunday School teacher there. But this was more a matter of duty than faith; I longed to get away to university where I could make my own mind up on such matters. I’d started attending a Methodist Church in Cardiff but my soul was still on the hunt. I wasn’t satisfied that I’d found peace or that peace had found me.

The search, I now realise, was frantic. I’d already begun to look at Communism. The man who is currently Mayor of Preston (I’ve only recently learned this) was a zealous Marxist. He’d helped me to read and understand the Communist Manifesto of 1848. I was attracted at once. Here was a movement that could change the world; its clarion call: “Workers of the world unite!” rang bells in my heart. Its anthem was even more stirring. It found its way into my deepest being:

*Then raise the scarlet standard high,
Beneath its folds we’ll live and die,
Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer,
We’ll keep the red flag flying here.*

In the week when Americans are prepared to puff up their chests to sing their blessed anthem: “The Star-Spangled Banner”, I recall with a special poignancy singing about the “blood-splattered banner”.

The Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956 had shaken my belief in all that (and Czechoslovakia in 1968 would finish it off). For all the uplifting message which had quite inebriated me, I’d seen idealism harden into ideology, solidarity become tyranny, hope crushed as tanks rolled in to deal with any deviation from the norm.

That was Communism that was. As I look at the Ukraine and Crimea, Syria and Iraq, in our day I can readily see that the more things change the more they remain the same. Alongside this economic determinism, the harsh doctrines of Karl Marx, I found myself taking a peep at Roman Catholicism. I'd read about "the Pope's armies" which were stationed in every continent and almost every country in the world. I knew that billions of people rallied to its cause. And, in 1962, the great thing for youngsters like me was the arrival on the scene of a man who'd begun his life as a peasant in Bergamo (Lombardy) and risen, by turns, to become a Bishop, an Archbishop, a Patriarch and, finally, Pope.

This was Pope John XXIII.

He was unlike his predecessors. They were stiff-necked, highly formalised, distant. Pope John, unlike the leaders of Communism, brought humanity into the leadership of his vast institution. Everyone called it *aggiornamento*, "a little springtime for the Church;" there was humour and fun. Serving the needs of others seemed to be paramount. And this man, at the age of 80, summoned the second Vatican Council. Worship was to be given to the people in their own language. Governance of the Church was to be spread into local regions. Everything was on the move.

Of course, I wanted more of this – hence the leaflets. But they were such a disappointment. They spoke the language of Pope John's predecessor – there seemed to have been no time to modify or update them. So everything was framed in terms of stricture, sin was given its full sway, obedience to the "party line" was expected, subservience to the institution was the *sine qua non*. The commands coming out of Rome (via these leaflets) were just like the orders coming out of Moscow. The Vatican and the Kremlin seemed to have so much in common. They painted their pictures in the same uniform grey.

So I abandoned that line of enquiry too in my search for faith.

The failings (as I saw them) of Communism and Catholicism alike, lay in the way the idea of authority had morphed into authoritarianism. All of this was polar opposite to that other great leader of a global movement, surely the greatest man in the whole of human history – Jesus of Nazareth.

*How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
In a believer's ear.*

Yes indeed. And what a multiplicity of roles this Jesus plays; how many identities he adopts; as the hymn continues;

*Jesus! My Shepherd, Brother, Friend,
My Prophet, Priest, and King,
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,
Accept the praise I bring.*

Here was meaning. A path opened up before me. This was revolutionary. Nothing could be more radical than this. Here was kingship on display in a man dying on a cross. Here was the flowering of the human spirit in the midst of human degradation.

They hung the message high above him: “Jesus of Nazareth – King of the Jews.” They’d written it in all the main languages available to them in their Mediterranean world – in Greek and Latin and Hebrew.

These words were undoubtedly written with irony, to spell a mocking word, to get a cheap laugh. And yet, the man hanging alongside Jesus, could see that even impending death had not diminished his greatness, his generosity of spirit, his love for the whole of humanity.

And so in the end, my search fixed not on temporary rulers or passing fashion; not on ephemeral ideologies that needed buttressing and underpinning with armies. It fixed instead on the very Jesus I’d taught in Sunday School. Across the ages, he speaks as one having authority and not as the scribes or the pharisees, not as fanatics or revolutionaries, not as professors or ideologues, not as politicians or CEO’s, or as the commanders of armies.

When he speaks, it’s as if a new idea is being born. And everyone knows that an idea whose moment has come is stronger than the mightiest army and impossible to halt. “Listening to his voice,” we’re told in a favourite hymn, “new life the dead receive”.

Those lost in the dark realms of addiction, in the comforting grip of hedonism, walking through the valley of the shadow of death, believing their own propaganda and lies, are the dead. And they (and all of us) are being offered new life.

The Communist Manifesto had something of all that. It told us that if you subsume your individual ambitions in the struggle to free the whole of humanity, then you’ll see the great victory come in our time. In the event, of course, it showed yet again man’s inherent fixation on personal power. One dictator replaced another in a seemingly endless line.

The Roman Catholic Church too had something of all that. Its great armies of people serving the needs of the poorest and most outcast members of society offers plenty of evidence for that. But it also resorted to indoctrination. It sought to control people’s thinking. It indulged in Holy War. It resorted to dictatorial and absolutist power. It too offered another version of the old, old story.

Jesus, King of kings, has stood his ground against all such tendencies down the centuries. He’s been colonised, made over, tarted up, hidden from view by those who pretend to follow him. Behind whatever veneer or colour has covered him, however, remains the irreducible Jesus, the friend of the poor and the lover of us all.

I became a Methodist but never slavishly a Methodist. When the institution I serve has lost its way (which it’s done now and again), or shouted at its people (which it’s resorted to at different times), or robbed Christ of his simple appeal by immersing him in a cold bath of rules and regulations, I’ve done my best to look the other way. I must admit there have been times when I’ve paid only lip-service to the latest ultimatum and kept digging for greater clarity about the nature of Christ when his real self seems obfuscated by partisan or prejudiced thinking.

We're living in dangerous and perplexing times. In Washington and Moscow we will soon have rulers who see power in personal terms and seem ready to apply it rigorously, mercilessly, cruelly. In the Philippines and South Korea, the people are rising and taking to the streets in protest. In France, Italy, Austria and Spain, we see dictatorships in the making. The unrelenting slaughter going on in Aleppo reminds us of the futility as well as the barbarity of war. When that city is razed to the ground, who will claim the victory? What kind of victory could it possibly be? And the thousands of people in desperate flight or living in makeshift camps as refugees, make us aware that we haven't a clue how to build a world where all God's children can live in peace.

John XXIII and now the good Pope Francis have shown us something of Jesus. We see it in their smile, in their embrace of the outcast, in their abhorrence of the trappings of their office, in their humility. We should treasure the word of Pope Francis, addressed to fellow priests, "shepherds should carry the smell of their sheep", he said. And I'd add this. Christians, all Christians, should carry the mark of their king whose greatness was shown in service, who refused to let go of the idea of love whatever was thrown at him, and whose love for us will never let us go.

This was the direction I chose to travel all those years ago. And it was the best thing I ever did.

Amen