

This last week I made a long delayed trip to the city of Berlin. I was originally meant to go on a school trip in 1965. Unfortunately some 6 weeks prior to departure I ran into the back of a car on my bike and badly broke my leg. So nearly 50 years later, I finally set foot in Berlin.

I found a lovely city bearing the marks of a long and varied history. We enjoyed a tour of the Bundestag which had witnessed the first flowering of German democracy with the abdication of the Kaiser in 1918 and its crushing by the Nazi Party.

The architecture of the city gave witness to an era of religious and social tolerance. In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, in a time of religious persecution elsewhere in Europe, the Prussia of Frederick the Great welcomed those forced to flee their homelands – French Huguenots, Russian Jews, Roman Catholics fleeing other German states - were all welcomed into what was a Lutheran state with Frederick building churches and synagogues for all groups.

The city also bears the marks of its more recent troubled past. A double line of cobble stones set in the road marks the line of the infamous Berlin Wall that divided the city for so many years – with over 200 people meeting their deaths as they attempted to cross it. The memorials of the Holocaust, the potmarked buildings bear witness to that era of madness that was the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reich and the devastation of the city in the final battle for Berlin that saw 85% of the city reduced to rubble.

At their height these Kingdoms of near satanic darkness seemed to stand supreme, triumphant. Now all that is left of them is a double line of cobblestones in the street and memorials to the victims of their monstrous terror and a society determined never to see their like again.

On our way home, as I reflected on what I had seen, I thought back to a mid day service in Taize in the summer of 1991. Taize was flooded with Eastern European Christians in this first year in which they had been able to travel freely. This particular day several coach loads of Poles were expected to arrive. In the service we were singing the chant, ‘Wait for the Lord, whose day is near. Wait for the Lord, keep watch, take heart.’ In the church in Taize the chant would be sung several times. I suddenly realised we weren’t singing it in English anymore but in Polish – ‘Pan blist ko jest .....Wait for the Lord,’ I suddenly realised I was worshipping alongside people who through years of darkness, of threats, of ridicule, of loss of livelihood, had kept the faith, had remained true to their Christian profession and had seen their once all powerful enemy crumble without a shot being fired, a bomb being dropped as an ugly wall in Berlin lost its power to terrorise, to control. I found myself profoundly humbled as I thought of our often lukewarm commitment to the faith.

All this struck a particular resonance with me Sunday before Advent, with its theme, ‘The Kingship of Christ.’ When we talk of Kingship, we are not talking of a modern day constitutional monarchy, with its radical curtailment of the rights and privileges of monarchy and the inalienable rights of the citizen before the monarch. We are talking of authority in every area of life, of allegiance, obedience, of commitment. But the nature of this Kingdom, its exercise of authority is different, radically different.

I go back to the Upper Room, to the figure of Jesus as he kneels to wash his disciples’ feet.

<sup>12</sup> After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?"

<sup>13</sup> You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. <sup>14</sup> So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. <sup>15</sup> For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. *John 13:12-15*

Authority, Lordship expressed in service, in sacrifice.

With this in mind let us turn to our Gospel reading. Over these Sundays leading up to Advent, we have read as our Gospel readings a series of Parables given by Jesus in those last few days in Jerusalem prior to his death. These are parables of waiting, of meeting, of recognition. In our Parable today, the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats both encounter the King at the end of time. Each discover that they have met him before in the poor, the naked, the hungry, the prisoner. Neither recognised him for who he was as each protest, ‘When did we see you poor, naked, hungry, in prison?’

For the goats, their ignorance is an excuse for their inaction. ‘Lord if we had realised who it was in those grubby clothes, of course we would have helped.’ The sheep discover to their amazement that in serving the poor and the marginalised they had served their King.

As Jesus sat down after washing his disciples feet, he asked them; ‘Do you know what I have done for you?’ This is a question that goes to the heart of my own understanding of the Kingship of Christ. Do I see simply a teacher who inspires me to do better? Or do I see in his life, his death and resurrection the face of God towards me? God acting to redeem, to lay claim to this weak, imperfect life. In us and through us, almost in spite of us, bringing his love into a broken and hurting world.

And there we meet our King.