



## The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

### Homily for the Feast of Christ the King (24<sup>th</sup> November) 2024

Ten days ago, at the Deanery Synod, we had a brief discussion about the use and abuse of power in the Church. It followed on from *those* events of the previous few days and, unsurprisingly, the discussion was dominated by the foibles of prelates. However, the paper, which had been produced as a background to the discussion, was much more focused on the model of power as exercised by Christ. It included that passage from Saint Paul's Letter to the Church in Philippi, which includes the hymn of Christ's self-abasement, taking the form of a servant. The point of the passage in the context of the discussion was that Jesus' example of exercising power was to offer Himself in service of mankind.

However, we need to be careful in understanding what this might mean. It is all too easy almost to sentimentalise the words, portraying Jesus as running around attending to the needs and wants of those He met. Whereas, in fact, the service that Jesus offered was one which was determined by the Will of God. The service He offered was first and foremost to the divine Purpose and it was a revelation of this Purpose, which underlay the charitable deeds of one sort or another that He undertook. His intention, by these actions, was to point us towards our God and set us along the path rather than make us comfortable where we are.

We might supplement this understanding by drawing into the discussion the dictum from Saint Mark's Gospel that, "If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." In this connexion, it is the significance of being the servant of all that we might contemplate. If we construe the "all" corporately rather than severally, we can begin to understand that there is programme behind the Dominical service: attending to the good of mankind as a whole rather than the predilections of individuals.

The service, to which we are called, therefore, is constrained by the parameters of the divine Will. Moreover, that Will is directed towards what we call in the jargon, the Salvation of souls. This mission operates at two levels: first, the individual's pilgrimage towards Redemption; and, secondly, the fashioning of communities, which both speak of that Purpose and also support individuals as they continue their journey.

It is this to which power in the Church should be directed; and this point we need to reflect on the character of power from a different perspective.

Broadly speaking, power emerges in two ways: authority, which pertains by laws and structures to a particular office or role; and slightly more nebulous, but none-the-less real, power, which attaches to particular individuals by virtue of their innate or cultivated characters - what we sometimes call charisma.

Ideally, these two sources of power should work in harmony: the formal regulation guiding the charismatic in how best it can serve the divine Purpose; and the charismatic breathing life and renewal into structures, which can ossify and fail in their purpose of sustaining a Church, which serves God's Will.

Too often, however, each can break free of their roles becoming ends in themselves: entities and phenomena to be served rather than to serve. In all the talk about necessary reforms to the life of the Church, we need to remember to attend to both sources of power; and to put at the centre of our deliberations the fact of Christ's model of servant power: one which seeks to embody and embed the divine Purpose of saving souls. We need should ourselves whether the service we offer to others also serves that end.