

## **Mattins 2 before Advent 2019**

On New Year's Day 1922 a young German woman called Edith Stein was baptised into Christ. The surprising thing about this was that she was by birth a Jew. Then twelve years on, as the Nazi regime began to flex its muscles, she fulfilled a longstanding desire and entered the Carmelite community in Cologne as a novice. Because of the Nazi persecution of Jews, she couldn't stay in Cologne long and the Carmelites transferred her to another community in Holland. However, in 1942, two years after the German invasion of Holland, she could hide no longer. It is recorded how when she was arrested the SS officer shouted in front of her "Heil Hitler" to which Edith Stein immediately replied, "Jesus Christ be praised". And that brief incident speaks volumes. It shows that for Edith Stein the key issue in the political situation of her time was about who is Lord – Hitler or Jesus; Caesar or Christ. Edith Stein's first loyalty was to Christ the King and, for his sake, she died in solidarity with his and her fellow Jews in August 1942.

And in today's OT reading we heard about a similar test of loyalty from the Book of Daniel. Like Edith Stein, Daniel was a Jew living in exile; in his case in Babylon. Daniel was a highly successful civil servant in the court of the King, Darius – and

his success was deeply resented by the Babylonian courtiers. So, as we heard, they manoeuvred on to the statute book a rule that outlawed prayer to any deity except to the Babylonian King Darius. It makes Darius sound like one of the Roman emperors in the time of the early church who were treated as gods in human form.

But for Daniel the real point about this law of the Medes and Persians was that it conflicted directly with the law of the God. For the first commandment given by God through Moses on Mount Sinai was this: “You shall have no other gods before me.” (Exodus 20:3) And he was part of a people in a covenant relationship with the Lord and therefore God was his King, worthy of his prayer and praise whatever the cost. There was nothing conditional about his devotions. When he was put to the test about who was his true Lord – Darius or Yahweh, Caesar or God - Daniel was open and transparent in his witness.

But there is a hint in chapter one of the book of Daniel that he was able to stand firm because he had been loyal in the small things of God before he came to the much larger test we heard about today. And there is, I think, a word to *us* in this pattern of integrity that ran through Daniel’s life. A couple of

weeks ago I was talking on the phone to a friend who is a priest in the west country and who was feeling particularly despondent. Despite all his teaching about following Christ and his own faithful example a member of his congregation had said to him the week before: "I'm afraid I won't be in church next Sunday because I will be watching the rugby on television instead". This doesn't seem to be hugely important in itself. But if we are not loyal to the Lord in small things the book of Daniel suggests we will find it impossible to be loyal when the choices are a matter of life and death. Who is our Lord and King is a question that confronts us more often than we might think.

Well, the writer of the Book of Daniel goes on to develop this theme of divine Kingship when he tells us that Daniel prayed in an upper room with the windows open toward Jerusalem. For a Jew like Daniel Jerusalem represented not just a physical place. Jerusalem was a symbol of the presence of God on earth, the city of the *great* King to quote the Psalmist. And by turning towards Jerusalem as he prayed Daniel was making the point that the God he worships transcends national boundaries. His God, Yahweh, is bigger than Babylon; bigger even than Israel. Yahweh is creator of the whole earth and the giver of life and breath to all people. And just as the sovereignty of God extends beyond national boundaries so his love and

care extend to all peoples – even those who are, on the face of it, enemies.

So, we find that the Daniel saga is not a simplistic account of confrontation between good and evil. The book depicts, for instance, concern and respect between Daniel and King Darius even though they are superficially on different sides. And with the coming of Jesus this breaking down of barriers between those who are of different nationality and faith to us or perceived as enemies becomes yet more prominent. Jesus taught us to see his image in the face of the stranger and foreigner which led Dietrich Bonhoeffer to say that if we exclude others, we exclude Jesus. Even though we may disagree with others there must be a deep love and acceptance of every person. And this sense of mutual acceptance came together in the person of Edith Stein with whom we started. She converted to Christianity, but she suffered like Daniel and died because she was Jewish. Her witness to Jesus Christ as Lord also recognised that he was crucified as King of the Jews. But dying a martyr's death in Auschwitz, she trusted, like Daniel in the faithfulness of her Lord to deliver and bring resurrection life because he is the King of glory who has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.