

## ***Allegiance to Christ***

Many people conceive of idolatry as the worship of statues and totem poles. They think of it as belonging to primitive peoples, and assume that it no longer exists. Idolatry is still to be found today. Idolatry occurs when one holds any value higher than God and morality.

Modern people have their idols too. Money is the most common idol today. But there are others – possessions, pleasure, success, fame, power.... Here we are dealing with things that are good in themselves. But when one ascribes to them supreme value they turn into 'gods'.

Idolatry leads at best to a superficial life, and at worst to a debased life. But the greatest harm idolatry does is that it causes people to forget the true God.

People can also make idols of themselves. One of the features of communism was 'the cult of personalities'. The leaders put themselves on pedestals. Everywhere you turned you saw pictures and statues of them. When communism collapsed many of these statues were pulled down and smashed. These monstrosities, these idols, stood for the oppression and terror.

At the time when the statues were being toppled, Time magazine published a small but touching picture. The picture was taken in the Ukraine. It showed a group of ordinary people gathered in prayer around a simple altar in a public place. Standing on the altar was a small bust of Christ. This little picture said it all.

After the idols had been toppled, Christ had been put back in his rightful place. What a contrast between his rule and the rule of the idols. The idols command; Christ invites. The idols rule through fear; Christ rules through love. The idols bring oppression and death; Christ brings freedom and life. No wonder we give him an allegiance and a loyalty we would not give to any other person or institution on earth.

The Gospel shows Jesus standing alone and unarmed before Pilate. As governor of a Roman province, Pilate was a powerful man. He had thousands of soldiers to call on. And there was Jesus – not one soldier to call upon. Yet Jesus was incomparably the

greater of the two. And, in spite of his vulnerability, he is the one who is in control.

Political power is the capacity to coerce others to do one's will. This capacity resides in a position such as king or president. It does not reside in the person who occupies the position. Political power is unrelated to goodness or wisdom. Many stupid and evil people have exercised this power.

Spiritual power, on the other hand, resides entirely in the individual, and has nothing to do with the capacity to coerce others. People of great spiritual power may be wealthy and may sometimes occupy positions of leadership, but they are more likely to be poor and lacking in political authority.

We have to distinguish between authority and influence on the one hand, and power and control on the other. Some of the people with greatest moral authority are quite powerless, and the most influential have no need to control those they influence. So it was with Jesus. Pilate had power over people; Jesus had influence on them. Jesus made his presence felt simply by the kind of person he was. There was a quiet authority about everything he said and did.

Christ is the hope of the human race. He shows us who God is, and how we can keep God at the centre of our lives. God is not some remote and uncaring figure. God is our heavenly Father, who is close to us, and to whom we are important and precious.

Christ did not come to establish a political sovereignty, but to bear witness to the truth of God's eternal and universal sovereignty.