

Christ the King
25/11/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 23:1 - 6
Psalm: Benedictus
Colossians 1:11 - 20
Luke 23:33 - 43

The power manifest in Jesus.

This is the last Sunday of the liturgical year and next week Advent will be upon us. Today in particular we cannot help but be mindful of change. For some this is a day of hope and celebration because their best efforts have been rewarded. For others their work has ended in disappointment and loss. As the accoutrements of the election campaign are swept away and we enter into a new era, what will this change mean for the Australian community? And what perspective will we as Church bring to our reflections on the exercise of political power in our community?

In 1925, when Totalitarian movements were active and gaining strength in Europe, the church established the feast of Christ the King (the Reign of Christ). Compared with other celebrations this one is new, but its message is as old as Christianity itself. In the 1920s and 1930s, while some of the names we know as notorious were busy competing with rivals and seeking to gain total power for themselves, the church sought to make the point that the real power lies elsewhere. The kind of power the church speaks of does not run according to the logic of human manipulations. It has a different set of reference points. These are symbolized for us by the graphic on the front of the Order of Service where the crucified Jesus is named the King of Jews. Here he embodies what is meant by Kingship, and reflects the forgiveness of sins that is the foundation of the Kingdom of God.

A second graphic at the back, and the Icon kindly lent to us by Peter Blackwood for today, represent a later attempt by the church to represent Christ's power in the world. These are in the Byzantine tradition, which depicts Christ as Pantocrator: *the ruler over all*. The style is similar to but different from images used to depict the reigning Emperor who would normally sit on a throne, hold weapons or symbols of political power and sometimes be surrounded by other figures of authority who were his underlings. When the church presents Christ in such icons, he is the Incarnate One in whose hand is the Word, the symbol of his power and the source of his life. With the other hand he offers a Blessing. Sometimes Byzantine icons show Christ at the centre of a group of people, which includes the Emperor and other political leaders. The point is that whereas Emperors may appear similarly depicted, Christ is the centre, the one who *rules over all*. The question is: what sort of power does he exercise and how would it make a difference as we begin the first day of a new term of Government for Australia?

The sort of power Christ expresses is embodied in his life, death, and work amongst us and is drawn from the understanding of who God is for us. Jeremiah's take on this emerges from his criticism of the rulers of Judah who have scattered the people through their mismanagement of royal power. Instead of caring for the nation and its

people the shepherds have thought only of themselves and their own wellbeing. They chose violence and political intrigue, rebelled against Babylon, brought disaster on the nation, and caused the exile of the people. But corruption in royal ranks and the dispersion of the people did not nullify the power of God. Jeremiah's message is: God will undo the wrongs of the shepherds. There will be a homecoming, the people will be gathered together, and a new line of Davidic Kings will rule wisely and justly, embodying the ways of this seeking God whose mode of operating is to care for the flock. The royals may have become self seeking and corrupt, and the people may have forgotten the promises of God. But God has not forgotten people or promises. In a time of change, depression and loss, Jeremiah declares, God willed to work for reconciliation and the renewal of community life.

Given Jesus' status as a prophet in Luke it is not surprising he is surrounded by conflict. The religious leadership led the cry, accusing him of Messianic pretension, advocating Tax Revolt and perverting the nation. Hearings before Herod and Pilate exonerated him, but still the leaders bayed for his blood. And so he came to the place of the Skull where, ironically and to their distaste, a sign was put up saying he was their King.

According to the logic of human understandings of power, Messianic Kingship surely meant the ability to save himself from this awful fate. They scoff at him and challenge him to change, because they know of no other form of leadership. But he does not respond. He remained steadfast in his commitment to enact God's will, and demonstrated what it really means to have *power over all*. He does not retaliate: he gives his life - they do not take it from him. He saves others by *not* saving himself. That is what it means to be *to have all things under your feet*. And that is why the cross is not a sign of defeat, but of the conquering of the last power of all – the power of death, especially as wielded by humans against each other.

Ironically it is the criminal who perceives the truth of what is happening. He finds the light that will illuminate the darkness, and the path that will lead to peace. He realizes Jesus will enter his sovereign realm not by coming down from the cross, but by dying. His request to be remembered is a confession of his trust in who Jesus is and in what he is doing. He seeks a place in a realm founded, not on the will to power and a system of judgemental recompense, but on pardon and trust in God. The reality in which Jesus dwells is a place where those in all sorts of exile - from truth and life - can be restored to wholeness and peace. This is the kingdom where deliverance comes, not by military defeat or typical alpha male behaviour, but through the reconciliation the New Testament calls the forgiveness of sins. At the place of the Skull the one who does indeed rule over all demonstrates God is one who does not run out of patience, love or liberty. And there is nowhere God is absent, powerless or irrelevant. Even on the cross something new is brought forth from a hopeless situation.

The old year is passing and a new one is beginning. While Advent becomes the emblem of God's loving intervention into human life, Christ the King shows us how far God will go for us. In this gracious invasion God seeks to use power to gather, not scatter, to save through reconciliation and forgiveness, and to act in ways, which bring promise and hope to all that lives. As we reflect on leadership that has failed, and on leadership that seeks to bring forth new, fragile hopes, we pray that all of us,

leaders and people, may work for good things in Australia. And we pray that we may continually seek light for the journey from this source, for here is the light that illuminates a gracious gift, given for our good, and the good of all. Thanks be to God. Amen.