

Christ the King
25/11/2012

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 23:1-7
Psalm 93
Revelation 1:4b-8
John 18:33-38

A Kingdom not of this world

The last Sunday of the year is dedicated to the celebration of Christ the King. The readings offer us the image of Christ the ruler over all, the Alpha and Omega, sandwiched between the last speech of King David, and a scene from the trial of Jesus.

The Psalm reminded us that in Scripture God is the only real King for the people of faith. We know how when the people began to yearn to have a king like the nations, delegating God's royal rule to an earthly leader raised theological questions. The authority to rule was given to Davidic kings, who were anointed by the Spirit of God. They were servants of God, but they acted just the same as political rulers. The struggle and disappointments that followed, even under David's rule, did not stop the Spirit of God from raising up, through the Prophets, the hope for a ruler who would embody the real meaning and purpose of Godly rule on earth. Over time, more and more focus fell on the future hope for an anointed one, a Messiah, whose actions would fulfil the truth of God and bring to fruition everything God wanted in the life on the world. On the feast of Christ the King we pause to reflect on the question: how do people of faith live according to the regime of God in Christ, while living under the regime of their rulers?

This question lies at the heart of the origin of this feast. Christ the King was introduced in 1925 when totalitarianism - a system of government that allows no rivals whatsoever - was an emerging reality. At the first celebration of Christ the King Mussolini had been in power for three years and the National Socialist party under Hitler was expanding. Confronted by the possibility of a Depression and world crisis people were looking for salvation through more authoritarian regimes. In this context the church reclaimed the idea that all rulers are stewards of a greater power that seeks life and freedom for all. Christ the King is the one to whom the church is oriented, and from whom it draws its life.

The introduction of the feast of Christ the King was an act of resistance. It signalled to governments of every flavour that the church has a prior allegiance that means, if it lives faithfully, it will not automatically baptise the policies of rulers, but retains the capacity to question and resist. The feast of Christ the King is to remind us that the motivation and destiny of the church transcends the political agendas of pragmatic leaders whose main aim is to hold on to power, rather than to serve the greatest good of all people.

The idea that the Kingdom of God is “not of this world” does not mean it is purely personal and does not affect anything structural or political. The Kingdom may not be “of this world” but it takes up space, is a place and it is a force to be reckoned with. It is a community of people in which the love and mercy of God is allowed to reign. A community of Kingdom people committed to reflect the light of Heaven, for all to see. Therefore, it will have an impact politically and socially. And if it lives faithfully, sooner or later will have to confront the powers of the world, and become the inspiration for challenging the godless and non-humanitarian policies of corrupt governments and organizations. The essence and destiny of the church does lie beyond this world, but it remains an earth bound, missionary movement: a community of people committed to live towards the vision of God’s reign, as it has been incarnated in Christ.

The scene of Jesus before Pilate is one that explores the question: “Are you the King of the Jews?” To speak of Jesus as King of the Jews was dangerous and explosive. Kings dominate. Kings fight for supremacy. But Pilate is confronted by one who refuses to do so. His incredulity is manifest: “are *you* the King of the Jews?” In *Jesus Christ Superstar* Pilate says: *who is this broken man cluttering up my hallway? Who is this unfortunate?* Pilate cannot understand that real strength is expressed in choosing another way that appears among us as weakness: the truth made flesh. The way of the truth of God made flesh and made perfect in the Cross.

The lectionary reading as set ended with Jesus’ saying “I came into the world to testify to the truth”, and, “everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice”. It left off Pilate’s mocking dismissal: “what is truth?” The lectionary composers left us with an assertion, but John leaves us with a pressing question. What is the difference between the sovereignty of brutal embodied political power, and the sovereignty of the truth made flesh? It is vital to keep the question in, because the exchange between Jesus and Pilate is a confrontation between power and truth. Not truth as victorious opinion, the winners of the argument, but as something that is embodied and lived out amongst us.

It is no accident that Jesus before Pilate is part of the passion narrative: this is the clue that defines the truth by which the church lives. In loyalty to God Jesus goes forward to suffer and to die and in doing so embodies the truth that expresses God’s gracious sovereignty towards all. It is not passivity that leads to the end. It is a discipline that expresses trust in the one who really is not of this world, but who seeks to effect the world through incarnated suffering love. This is quite different from brooking no rivals and dominating by force. Jesus before Pilate is a scene by which all world rulers are judged. Will they acknowledge they are servants of a power greater than themselves? Will they honour the innocence of the victim? Will they act with justice and integrity? These things belong to what inspires and leads us in our life in the world. These things are all part of the truth in which we live. Others may not choose to live by this vision, but we do and it affects our way of being in the world - the mode our mission.

Walter Brueggemann says ministry under the word does not have to involve spectacular acts of social crusading. Rather, it means offering an alternative perception of reality - a contrary narrative - to the one that gains currency in the world. Every member of the body of Christ is nurtured in, and called to live from, a reality that is different from the norm. And we are called to embody the truth of that narrative.

How do we do that? Firstly, by being here. The fact that we gather publicly in this way week by week, speaks to the world around us. People look at the church with disdain, but all who come here help to keep the rumour of God alive, a sign there is another way.

Secondly we offer an alternative perception of reality in the way we reach out. There are plenty of issues for us to respond to. Witness the changes to the rules about Asylum Seekers that are taking place. Our leaders are trying to create the impression that we are a tough country, and if you dare to flee to us in search of freedom, you can expect to live for five years in poverty and mental depression. This is where our Asylum Seeker Project began and still works: making room for those without resources, who are marginalised and under pressure.

And this week we have been able to celebrate a cease-fire between Israel and Palestine, but we must realise that the speeches proclaiming Israel's right to defend itself continually left out a key part of the story. Gaza is a territory living under a blockade that causes great suffering. The rockets of Hamas that Israel found so intrusive were not fired for nothing. They were a relatively weak form of protest over the continuing and insufferable conditions that exist in Gaza. In any report I heard, world leaders, including our own, repeatedly neglected to say this, or to publicly hold Israel to account for it. What is truth is a deep theological question in John, but many times it is much simpler to explain and address. The church can offer an alternative narrative to the one that gains currency by simply telling the truth. There is another side to the story. Thankfully some here are putting in effort to do just that.

As we conclude this liturgical and missional year, we are called afresh to live according to the truth of the regime that comes from Christ. May we renew our commitment to do just that, as we go forward into a new year.
