

Christ the King – Rev'd Hans Christiansen – Sunday 22 November 2009

Readings: Rev 1:4b-8 John 18:33-37

Today on the last Sunday of the Church year we celebrate the feast of Christ the King. We have been journeying the whole year with Christ. We have listened to his many wonderful teachings and sat by the cross and experienced his resurrection power and now today at the end of the year we affirm that Christ indeed is head and ruler over our lives in every way and that he is ruler over the Church and indeed, as the cosmic Christ, even ruler over all of the world.

I know some people struggle with the metaphor of Christ as king. For some it is too patriarchal, hierarchical and based on power. For others it is too distant a metaphor from our daily reality. Perhaps the metaphor for Christ as king does not work so well any more in our society as indeed some theologians argue? We who live in modern western democratic states no longer have direct experience of what it is like to live under dictators and monarchs and so our feeling of how important a good king or queen is perhaps is diminished. But let us try to find meaning in the metaphor of king.

The king in ancient time was the monarch who ruled everything. While there were some civil rights in the Roman Empire for Roman citizens, everything depended upon the king. Security, stability, economics, and food – all could be lost in one moment if the king wished.

It is in this social scenario that the ancient church named Christ as King of Kings. Christ, as we heard in the Revelation reading before, is *“the one who was and the one is to come. He is the firstborn of the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth”*.

I think we can still imagine what a good king is like and what it would be like to live under a dark king, as Pilate is a symbol of in today's gospel.

The king is a symbol and an archetype for wholeness, security, peace and happiness. If we have a good king we can trust we are happy and secure, but if we have evil king we are unsafe and unhappy. This even applies in a small way to our much less powerful prime ministers who do not have anyway near the powers of an ancient king or modern dictator.

Think how much it affects us all when our prime ministers speak well and act justly and with compassion. They are not only leaders of governments they are symbols who hold a certain power over our national imagination. Think, for example, how much it meant for people when our current prime minister delivered the apology to the stolen generation. People were proud and in tears. Or think how much it brought people low when the previous government and recently the current government treated refugees appallingly. We were ashamed. Or think how Barack Obama has brought a great degree of hope to the American people and to the world through his highly symbolic speeches.

Leaders matter and some leaders like Obama have king energy. You can feel it. And when our leaders have true and good king energy then we feel proud, secure, imaginative and creative.

Christ is the cosmic king who ensures our wholeness, joy and happiness. He is the king of all creation. His speeches and teachings and his presence in our spirit, through the Holy Spirit, nurtures us and gives us hope and strength to ultimately become small images of Christ the King ourselves.

Who is our Christ-king we might ask again today?

Based on today's text from John's gospel we can begin by saying that Christ, the noble King, is fortunately anything but our earthly kings. "*My kingdom is not of this world*, Jesus says to the dark king (or prefect) Pilate. "*If my kingdom were of this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over*" Jesus says.

Christ the king is not a dictator or even a noble democrat like Barack Obama. Christ is the vulnerable, forgiving, non-violent and loving King. He is the exact opposite image of what most kings are who have ever been in power. His kingdom is one of unconditional love, total non-violence, freedom and complete unconditional forgiveness.

But it is so difficult for the church to be held and led by such a King because we want a king of justice who can justify our need for justice. We want a tooth for a tooth and an eye for eye. We want a faith where there are clear guidelines and those who do good are rewarded and those who do not so good are judged accordingly.

But the Jesus of scripture is far from that. Look at his whole life as portrayed in sacred scripture. Jesus never taught that good is rewarded with good. In fact he taught that sinners and wounded ones were deeply loved by him. Think of the prodigal son and the feast and welcome the father prepares for the son. Think of the angry older son, so often a symbol of religious leaders who cannot control such an exuberant and grace-filled and rule-less faith. Or think of Jesus saying to his disciples that God sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous alike. Or think of the way Jesus invites the criminal on the cross who most probably had done very bad deeds straight into the kingdom. What would the ones who want a righteous God think of that? And finally think of the way the resurrected Jesus comes back to greet his friends who had all betrayed him and left him. Does he demand justice? Is he angry? Does he ask them to repent? What does he do? He speaks peace to them and breathes peace upon them. He never once even asks them to repent, he simply just breathes peace upon them.

Jesus, as the Franciscan Richard Rohr, so beautifully says is "*the most unlikely founder of a religion*". Why, because it is very difficult to make laws and rules out of teaching given by such an exuberant mystic and free person as Jesus. We want a king who can reward us when we do good and punish those who do bad. We want a king who can look after us and even at the worst of times condemn those outside our own fold. But Christ is fortunately much more generous than us.

Christ is the man and the king and the God of complete non-violence and utter forgiveness. His reign and kingdom can never be about exclusion and condemnation, it is simply impossible. It would be against his very nature.

Jesus does speak about judgement and at various places he talks about judgement being for a long time. I interpret that as meaning that if we can't receive the grace and forgiveness of God in our lives both now and hereafter God cannot force us. God wants us, but sometimes we can't receive because we can't open.

However, God, as Christ said, will keep seeking the lost and never allow one to be lost. There has been a long tradition in the church, called Apocatastasis, which has been held by many of the early fathers right through to today, which teaches that in the very end God through Christ will restore all people and all things and the whole cosmos.

In the end Christ's kingdom is so much bigger than our small tribal kingdoms where some are in and some are out. In the end, as it is written in the last chapters of Revelation, there will come a time when there will be no more pain and all tears will be wiped away and as the apostle St Paul intuited in that time God will be all in all. Note the apostle's words 'all in all' not all only in some, but God will be all in all.

The kingdom of Christ is an everlasting kingdom. However much we fail to get it right (and we all do), we are protected and held by the noble and non-violent King. In his reign we can be free, safe, imaginative and creative. We are all protected and held spiritually by the king of forgiveness, so let us seek to be as generous and loving and forgiving as our king is, and let us trust that our judgement is not God's judgement. God will have the final say and it will always be, as Jesus revealed, unconditional forgiveness and unconditional love.

Amen.

Hans Christiansen