

“You Call Me King”

Christ Church Darwin Christ the King * 22 November 2009*

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and demanded, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus answered, “Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?”

Pilate replied, “Am I a Jew? Your own nation and chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?” Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”

“So you are a king,” Pilate asked him. Jesus answered, “You call me king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate asked him, “What is truth?”
John 18:33 - 38

“You Call Me King”

Thank you for this chance to join in your worship at Christ Church. I begin by honouring the Larrakia people, caretakers of this land from time immemorial, keeping it safe and sacred through long generations. And I bring greetings from Nungalinga College, a place of safe and sacred learning for Indigenous people across Australia.

The Sunday of Christ the King fits awkwardly into the church year. Between grim warnings of Last Days and the *Adventure* of preparing for the birth of Jesus, this strange celebration calls us to think deeply about the meaning of sovereignty.

There is not much to guide us in the New Testament, where every earthly ruler is shown as flawed and fallen. In this Year of Mark we have to substitute a text from John's gospel – and no wonder: here is Mark's message from Jesus about royalty:

Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles, those whom they consider their rulers lord it over them, and their 'great ones' are tyrants over them. It is not so among you! So whoever wishes to become great among you must be your slave, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.” (Mark 10:42-44)

Even John's gospel does not make the task easy. Whenever people think about Jesus as a king (apart from Palm Sunday, this happens only in John), he completely dismisses the notion.

So let me make it plain. When we call Jesus king, we echo only one gospel voice: the voice of Pilate, who crucified him.

The early church followed the gospel pattern. No early image of Jesus shows him in any royal symbols except the crown of thorns: it was brutal soldiers from a foreign army of occupation that dressed the Nazarene in purple, put a sceptre in his hand.

Only soldiers and their equally cruel commander ever pasted that label on Jesus. Yes, he was hailed as 'son of David' – but how many Jewish boys descended from that monarch with his many wives? 'Sons of David' were common as stones on the temple paving – that's why Bethlehem had no rooms free.

We get our notion, then, that Jesus means 'kingship' from Pilate, who crucified him. But three centuries after Pilate hung his spiteful sign over Jesus' corpse, another Roman ruler found a new way to crucify the Nazarene.

Constantinus was fighting a bloody civil war when he summoned support from underground Christians across the empire. He won a crucial battle, and then the war, when Christians flocked to his cause after a vision of the cross and flaming words, "*In hoc signo vincus*" -- 'In this sign, conquer.'

Conquer he did, the Roman world and much of Asia, founding a new capital city whose ruins now lie under the buildings of Turkish Istanbul. Constantine conquered more than armies and empires. He also conquered Christianity – twisted it into his own image, changed it forever, and left us with those ruins.

With Constantinus, the paintings changed. The Nazarene in humble Jewish tunic vanished, giving way to an imperial Jesus in royal garments. Thorns gave place to precious gems: Jesus the king was born.

It *was* a second crucifixion. For 300 years no Christians served in armies; they followed Jesus' teaching: "love your enemies ... overcome evil with good." Christians were seen as dangerous subversives because they refused to join the wars of empire.

For 300 years Christianity held its roots as a religious movement with no hereditary rulers or hierarchies of wealth or status. Bishops were elected for fixed terms. Presiding at the sacrament could be chosen at random. Noble-born merchants listened to sermons from freed, or serving, slaves.

In the early church of Jesus a bishop could claim that wealth was theft. When my namesake St Lawrence was caught and tortured, he consented at last to show his persecutors where the church had hidden its treasure hoards. Lawrence led them to the slums of Rome, pointed to the poorest of the poor, and said, "Here are the treasures of the church." (They burned him to death on a metal grill for that.)

Christian women were decision-makers and leaders, all races were equal, even animals were treated with kindness and respect. This was the church that Constantine made legal.

It was not the church he left behind. Within one generation, the Roman army banned soldiers of all religions *except Christianity*. Within one century, Augustine proclaimed imperial violence as God's weapon, calling Roman soldiers to massacre Africans who disagreed with his theology. Under Roman dominance women were sent back into silence and slaves back into servitude and animals back into cruelty.

How did the crucified one feel about this new betrayal? Did he look down upon Constantine and say, “*You call me king*”?

Yet through the long centuries we have *not* followed the martyrs and pacifists who turned the empire on its head. We have borrowed the words of two powerful Romans who crucified Jesus once then again. We are so thoroughly seduced by Constantine’s betrayal we have a Sunday to enshrine it in worship.

It is a tragedy that much of the church of Imperial Jesus still wants women sent back into silence; thinks of wealth as God’s reward; considers some humans of less worth than others; and thinks nothing of the cruelty that puts meat on our plates and live sheep on our ships.

St Lawrence lost. Pilate’s label stuck. Constantine conquered. Jesus is dead: long live the king!

“It shall not be so among you,” Jesus said. No rulers, no tyrants, call no one sovereign, name no one Lord. Sorry, Jesus; we like our golden crowns.

And because we are caught up in a royal view of Jesus, we look desperately for models of kingship that can redeem the label. David is often our starting point. Surely his last words hold royal values worth honouring:

One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God,
is like the light of morning, like the sun rising on a cloudless morning,
gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.

But of course these are not David’s only last words – he also advises Solomon to ‘use your wisdom’ to ensure that both Joab and Shimei are killed in David’s name. Solomon adds a few murders of his own, and with all the killings in place, “the kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon” (I Kings 2:46).

Samuel had warned God’s people, bringing the truth about royalty:

[The king] will take your sons ... to run before his chariots; ¹² ... plough *his* ground ... reap *his* harvest, ... make his implements of war ... ¹³ He will take your daughters ... take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards ... ¹⁶ take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys ¹⁷ ... and you shall be his slaves (I Samuel 8).

Almost every reign in Israel began in violence, and the ancient state of Israel ended in violence with a rebellion seeking to replace imperial Rome with a Jewish king instead. But Jesus had warned them like Samuel did: “It shall not be so among you”.

On this Feast Day of Kingship we no longer live like the first Christians; we have inherited, and perpetuated, a Constantinian imperial church: and that will not changesoon or easily.

Australia, of course, remains a monarchy; and even if the Sovereign lives far away, our actions echo Samuel's warnings. Imagine, if you can, how Indigenous Australians would hear that list of 'kingly' actions:

take your sons ... take your daughters ... take your land and oyster beds, yam-fields, fish, and animals ... you shall be slaves to bosses who do not even speak your language...

We call it 'Emergency Response'; but we might as well call it 'kingship'. It feels no different on Indigenous ground.

Is this really the kind of rule that God seeks? Is there anything we could learn from Indigenous wisdom to bring us closer to the way of Jesus Christ? Here is one possibility: What if we drop the 'g' from that royal word? What if we focus less on the *kingship* of Christ, and more on the *kinship* Jesus represents?

Aboriginal kinship systems are more complex than almost any other human institution. With all their flaws they have helped sustain the world's oldest culture in harmony with the land and all its creatures. Indigenous elders believe they come from the Creator and reflect the nature of God, who is '*kin to creation*', related to us and all things, *kindred* within the living cosmos.

This is a far truer Biblical theme. 'The heavens tell the glory of God': we learn who God is by observing God's creation. Those distant furious stars are actually our ancestors! We began in their fire: *we are stardust*. God cares for the stars; and they are kin to us.

God shows the same care for all living creatures: All look to God, and find themselves embraced. We too are kin to all creation, and can care for it as God does: tenderly, compassionately, feeling its hurts as our own.

We are kin to one another – a crucial message in these days – 'all God's offspring' as Paul quoted a Greek poet. Races, genders, generations: we are kin together, and no one has rights that others do not share. "It shall not be so among you."

Because we know God through Jesus Christ, a victim of imperial power. Jesus shows us God's true image: a face of utter *kinship*. We recognise God in the crucified Jew: 'kin' to creation, who suffers in its suffering and yearns for its release..

... And calls us to go and do the same.

Kindred with God in the kinship of Christ
– now *that* is worth a celebration!

AMEN.