

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

Christ the King

(b-os 34)

25th November 2018

'Tale of Two Kingdoms'

Readings: 2 Samuel 23: 1-7; Psalm 132: 1-12;
 Revelation 1: 4b-8; John 18: 33b-37.

Celebrating the Feast

The celebration of Christ the King, on this Sunday before the season of Advent, is a relatively new festival beginning in the early twentieth century. On this day we are given the opportunity to explore what it means to live as part of God's world and to explore the idea of servant leadership that Jesus modelled.

Through his life and ministry, Jesus often spoke of the ambiguity of the spiritual life. Sayings such as; *'those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it'* (Matthew 10:39), and *'whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many'* (Matthew 20:26-28) are examples of this. It is only with hindsight that the disciples realised what Jesus meant and so came to understand the concept of 'servant leadership' – an important model required for the nurturing of community life.

In my October Connections article, I raised the distinction between the idea of the God who rules and the God who suffers. Our views of God can have an ongoing and dramatic influence over how we understand our faith and what we believe God requires of us. If we understand God to be one who always wins and beats others into submission, then it is likely that this will become a template for how we approach the world and can justify our seeking to win at all costs. But if we understand God to be one that can suffer and serve, then a different view of our mission emerges.

This is the story of two kingdoms; one that is about power and control (the kingdom of this world) and the other of service and sacrifice (the kingdom of heaven). The encounter between Pontius Pilate and Jesus, in the Gospel reading, is an example of the disconnection between one who is committed to the kingdom of this world and Jesus, whose focus is beyond the exercise of raw earthly power. As he says: *"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."*

What Goes Around Comes Around

A saying from my Army days, and possibly known to a number of you, is the one: ‘what goes around comes around’. It is a reminder of the inter-connectedness of community life and the importance of relationships and how their effects can endure over time – even beyond our own life-time. One example comes from my time as a chaplain with the Royal Military College - Duntroon.

I remember the Commandant’s address to the staff at the beginning of my second year when he emphasised the importance of ‘exemplary leadership’ as the most effective way of nurturing the cadets. *“We need to be aware that the cadets learn more from observing how we instructors behave and by copying us than from what is said in the lecture theatre”* he said, *“How we treat them and one another is constantly being observed, evaluated and either adopted or rejected”*.

I was able to confirm this view after a visit to the Cadets Mess one day when I heard them talking about their instructors, and in which they were deciding who was ‘good and worth following’ and who was ‘useless’. Shortly after that I went to the Officers Mess and heard the instructors evaluating the cadets on who is ‘good officer material’ and who should be ‘ditched’. They were somewhat shocked and offended when I told them that I had just been in the Cadets Mess and heard their students going through the same exercise concerning the instructors! What goes around comes around.

You see, the things that we do are observed and have a capacity to live on beyond our current time - everything is connected to everything else and that is relational truth. It is the way of parenting, but it also occurs corporately. I therefore wonder what attitudes are being generated nationally today by our treatment of refugees, indigenous peoples, the poor, and the marginalised; and how these things will shape the views of future generations. Perhaps it will not be described in positive terms.

This has also been a matter of consequence for the institutional churches as a result of the terrible experiences of child abuse, domestic violence, bullying, judgementalism, and dysfunctional management practices that people have experienced within them. Indeed, the recent fiasco created by the Sydney Synod in deciding to exclude particular people and activities from church property is yet another example of the exercise of power and control instead of grace and self-sacrifice. We resort to ego, arrogance and hubris at our peril. Jesus taught against such things.

The problem here is often caused by our expectations. Part of the reason that people rejected Jesus was because his message and manner did not measure up to their expectations of what a Messiah should look like. They sought a warrior messiah who would win wars and make Judea great again; whereas, Jesus appeared to be weak and disinterested in power and control. He was not behaving like the mythological King David, nor even the more recent Herod the Great who had restored the temple.

What Sort of King?

Pilate asked Jesus if he was 'King of the Jews'. This was a special title back in the day given to Herod the Great. Herod was not a Jew, he was an Edomite, yet he was granted the status of 'King of the Jews' by the Roman Senate. He arrived in Judea and fought for three years to gain control of his kingdom, over which he later became an unpredictable blood-thirsty tyrant.

Herod was the example of a leader who took control and ruled by power, coercion and the exercise of violence. He was the type of Messiah that many of the leaders of Judea looked for. But his reign was violent and cruel; and despite this, the Romans still remained the overlords. Pilate was therefore not being pleasant to Jesus by asking if he was the 'King of the Jews', it was more likely that he was mocking him.

The gospels present us with a most unlikely 'king' or leader. Jesus was executed by crucifixion - a traitor's death. Yet, his death changed the course of history, by emphasising what he had taught in his life - the way to save one's life was to lose it.

Indeed, the Kingship of Christ has two dimensions. The first is his divinity and majesty, which arises from a 'looking back' at the work of Christ from creation through to the present and on into the future - the 'once and future king'. It expresses that aspect of Christ's nature that is eternal, all loving, and all powerful.

The second dimension is that of Christ's human 'suffering and service', which is a kingship based on powerlessness and self-giving. It reminds us that reconciliation with God has come at a price of great sacrifice. Although all authority comes from God and is present in Christ, he yet chose to be a 'servant king'. He gave of himself so that others may live. This is the supreme example that God gives us of how we are to live - not lording it over others but serving them. Indeed, it is the model that has inspired so many of the saints down through the centuries. What goes around comes around!

The kingdom of God is not a place, but instead is the rule of Christ in our hearts. That is why it is not 'of this world'. God's kingdom does not operate through coercion or buying people's souls with promises of power and wealth; rather the kingdom encourages people to come into a loving relationship with God and one another.

God offers all of this to us. Indeed, there is nothing that we have to do to become a part of God's kingdom except to choose it. The question for us then is 'who rules in our lives?' There are many pretenders to the throne - such as money, power, control and status. But the kingdom of God is not like this and neither should we, the church, be like it - it is our choice. Today we are invited to run the risk of letting Christ rule in our hearts and thereby entering into his kingdom.