

Christ the King, November 22nd, 2009
John 18:33-37

Kingdom

“My Kingdom is not from this world. My kingdom is from another place”, we hear Jesus Christ responding to the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate in the gospel reading today.

What do you think of when you hear those words? Do you think of it as God in his heaven, in his own world, wherever or whatever that might be; in any event it's somewhere else and something else; it's detached, away from, separate from our world? Or maybe you think that this kingdom is on the other side of life itself – that it is that place or state of being we head for, or fall into, after death?

Christ the King Sunday allows us to stop for a moment and think about these things. Throughout the gospels, when we hear Jesus talking of a “kingdom of God”, or a “kingdom of heaven”, or simply his “kingdom”, what can we hear him telling us, two thousand years later? What does it mean for Christ to be king, and what is this kingdom?

In today's gospel reading, Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?”. Of course Pilate's mind is on the political realities of kingship. With the Jewish people in that time and place oppressed by Roman rule, a “King of the Jews” would have represented a challenge to Pilate's authority and (more importantly) to his masters in Rome. It was clear Jesus had a substantial following, and a certain power and charisma. So Pilate was serious in his questioning.

Yet, Jesus must have looked far from regal as he stood before Pilate. There was no obvious power, no prestige. He had been arrested in Gethsemane; all his disciples had abandoned him; he had defended himself before a Jewish court; and he had probably been roughed up by Roman soldiers.

In reply to Pilate's question, Jesus denied that he was a king in any way that would make sense to the Roman governor. “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.” Jesus is establishing that his kingdom is not founded on human power, imperial supremacy and the force

of arms. It's not the coercive power of the sort that Pilate understands. His power and authority is not derived from the usual worldly tokens and order of leadership and kings. His behaviour, too, has been nothing like how kings and supreme leaders exercised their authority. No brute strength, only the example and message of self-giving love.

Pilate and the Jewish religious authorities who brought Jesus to trial can't grasp the nature of Jesus' kingship, and of this kingdom. Even Jesus' disciples failed to understand it. They hoped Jesus in his popular leadership would lead an uprising and overturn Roman rule. They jostled amongst themselves to be his preferred 2iC's. But Jesus told them that they completely misunderstood the nature of his kingship and kingdom: 'It's not about being first and greatest', he said, "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant."

And this kingdom, or kingship, or reign, is still being misunderstood. Perhaps not so much in the "how" of kingship and leadership –leading with wisdom and humility. But, for many, Jesus' kingdom is heard as a location -the "kingdom of heaven" – the words used frequently in Matthew's gospel – and so this kingdom is placed outside of the here and now and relegated to the "sweet by and by". If that's where think God's kingdom is, it's time for a reorientation. In Luke's gospel, (17:21), Jesus says "the kingdom of God is among you" – it's happening now and it's happening because Jesus himself is the kingdom. The kingdom, we hear, is not that which was gathered around Jesus when he lived in the flesh 2,000 years ago, nor is it just the eternal, unseen, hereafter. Wherever Christ is, there is the kingdom. In and amongst us, here and now: because Christ continues to be alive, through his Spirit in the Church and in the lives of his followers. Our reading from Revelation this morning sums that up: "Who was and who is and who is to come, the almighty."

There's a fine but clear distinction that Jesus is making. On the one hand, his kingdom is not "from this world" or "of this world". He's not talking about place; he's describing the nature and function of his kingship. This is about its origin. John's gospel repeatedly emphasises that Jesus originates from God, and his authority is from God. What Jesus stands for, who he is, and what he does, doesn't derive from the world; neither does it line up with what our world and our world's systems value and applaud. When the gospel writer John talks about the world, he means the place that is both hostile to God and the things of God, but it is also "what God made and loves and what Jesus saves and brings to life."ⁱ

So it is, that on the other hand, whilst this kingdom is not *of* or derived *from* this world, it is nevertheless *in* this world. It's not merely a spiritual entity. The story of Christ is not one of abandoning this world that is hostile to him. On the contrary, his is a love that brought him to take on flesh in this material world; his is a love that will not abandon, his is a love that will continue to give, share and welcome. This kingdom of his that stands in contrast to the world is like light that dispels darkness, like salt that flavours and preserves, like yeast that grows. This kingdom is lodged and it's growing in the lives of the people who put Christ first as their king; who allow the Spirit of God to drive their lives; who are on guard against the values of a world that increasingly puts the individual's comfort and wealth above anything and anyone else.

This kingdom we pray for - "your kingdom come" – in all its fullness, when fully realised, will be a kingdom – our world - with peace-making instead of war, liberation not exploitation, mercy not vengeance, care for the vulnerable instead of privileges for the powerful, generosity instead of greed. The list goes on and on. The political, economic and social subversions would be huge.ⁱⁱ But more than this – when we belong in Christ's kingdom, when we allow him to rule our lives, we see the world differently. We begin to see the world whole, seeing it with the eyes of God. And so we live in the world differently; living with our lives ruled by and immersed in Christ's love and grace, aware that this world is his.

And so, a bottom line for us: the issue in our Gospel and for our lives is: who is really in charge? If your goal is to be in charge yourself, the invitation from God is to examine yourself about what really exerts the greatest influences on you. The choice of who and what we allow ourselves to be ruled by is something that each of us must challenge in our lives.

Baby Grace, being baptised today, will have to make that choice for herself as she grows. Her parents have taken the first step by bringing her for baptism this morning, but it will be she herself who will later make her own choice about what she values in life, how she will live her life, and what place she will give to God in her life. If she learns to listen for God's voice, she, too, will hear his invitation to live under his rule and with his values. Like all of us, she will constantly be challenged and seduced by a world that not only seeks to reduce God, but seeks to replace God with worldly achievements, material tokens of success and value systems that place the individual at the centre. The world wins when that happens. The world wins when we compartmentalise God in our lives –like keeping God locked up in church for Sundays or Christmas or Easter, and

living at other times as if he doesn't matter or doesn't exist. And the world wins when we sentimentalise God as a benign and kindly but distant Father/Mother / uncle figure, and demote Jesus from Son of God, God in the flesh, to the status of being just a wise teacher, like a Buddha or guru. But this winning is deceptive –it's fleeting and it's hollow.

And imagine – imagine what our world would be like, what our lives would be like, if each one of us allowed Christ to reign in each of our lives.

And that question again: who do you allow to be in charge of your life? Who is in charge of your life? And what are you going to do about it?

ⁱ Rowan Williams *Christ on Trial* p.87

ⁱⁱ http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons_that_work_116701_ENG_HTML.htm