



Christ the King

25th November 2012

2 Samuel 23:1-7, Psalm 132: 1-12, Revelation 1: 4-8, John 18:33-37

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen

We crown the Church's year with the feast of Christ the King. The first reading points us toward the essence of this feast day, and introduces us to the 'kingship' of Christ through *"the last words of David: The oracle of David, son of Jesse, the oracle of the man whom God exalted..."* The psalm develops the link with David and the lineage of David *"The LORD swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back: "One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne."* The second reading from the Book of Revelation describes a scene that is set *"before his throne"*, so once again we have an underlining of the 'king' that today is dedicated to. Then we come to the gospel reading and we're given the narrative of Pilate seeking to make sense of the whole idea of 'Christ the King'. As we hear that Pilate ask the question, *"Are you the King of the Jews?"* we might find for ourselves an invitation to ask and explore such questions for ourselves. And so let's begin our exploration with the beginning of the feast of Christ the King, and we don't have to go back very far in history to find that beginning.

Christ's kingship was addressed in the encyclical [Quas Primas] of Pope Pius XI, published in 1925 and the pope instituted the Feast of Christ the King in response to growing nationalism, secularism and fascism that was being promoted and realised in the Kingdom of Italy by Mussolini. Pius XI set the date as "the last Sunday of the month of October - the Sunday, that is, which immediately precedes the Feast of All Saints". Pope Pius in that same encyclical defined the catholic church as *"the kingdom of Christ on earth"*.

In 1969 an apostolic letter [Mysterii Paschalis] of Pope Paul VI gave the celebration a new title: *"D. N. Iesu Christi universorum Regis"* (Our Lord Jesus Christ King of the Universe). He also gave it a new date: the last Sunday in the liturgical year, and through this choice of date *"the eschatological importance of this Sunday is made clearer"*.

And finally, a more recent comment; in November 2006, Pope Benedict XVI remarked that Christ's kingship is not based on "human power" but on loving and serving others. *"The Cross is the 'throne' from which He demonstrated the sublime regality of God-love."*

In the life and history of the Church, the feast of 'Christ the King' is a recent innovation, it has certainly undergone some changes, and the more we look at those subtle changes the more we begin to engage the mind of Pilate in today's gospel.

Pilate didn't have the reference points of past popes, and nor was he confined by the traditions and practices of the church. And so he invites us to break out of the confines of what we

already know and to enter a dialogue. His, "*Are you the King of the Jews?*" invites us to ask and seek answers for ourselves, who is Jesus and who is the Christ?

In today's gospel passage and in reply to Pilate's seeking questions Jesus answers; "*My kingdom is not from this world*". So we are immediately looking for a new understanding of Christ's 'kingship', and it is one that is not from this world. For all of us that should be seen both as a breath of fresh air, and at the same time a motivation to look beyond our everyday appreciation of Kings and rulers.

If we pause to look at the rulers of the world, the present day Kings, and even the kings of history, can we name any that serve, or served, the common good in a way that reflects the life of Christ and teaching of the gospel? "*My kingdom is not from this world*" invites us to open ourselves from the confines of tradition; from the current norms of everyday life and to look for a new direction in our participation in the unfolding of tomorrow. In the same dialogue Pilate comments that, "*Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me*", so the links developed in the earlier readings with David, an icon of Jewish kingship, are very much called into question.

What is clearly stated in the gospel is the purpose and position that Christ speaks for himself: "*I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.*" And that statement gives us a very different appreciation of leadership to that which we experience 'in the world'. Christ offers us a leadership, a direction that is birthed in "*truth*", not power, oppression, fortune, or political expediency. And it is a leadership for "*everyone*", not for Christians, Australians, Anglicans, but for everyone. Another invitation for us to see ourselves as part of, and integral to, the whole of humanity.

The reading from the Book of Revelation is another source for reflection and for open exploration. It offers us a more mystical framework and so invites us to more imaginative creativity in our seeking. Remember Pope Paul VI changed the date of the feast of Christ the King in order to emphasise the theological significance of its relevance to the 'End Time'.

The reading begins with a greeting "*Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come*". This is not some clever abstract reference, it speaks of another paradigm, another worldview that goes beyond the confines of Paul VI's thinking, and beyond the literal worldview that is confined by the events of birth and death. It invites us into the very paradigm of truth to which Christ testifies, the paradigm of resurrection.

If we are unable to break free from the orthodox, the obvious worldview, it is unlikely that we will get any further than Pilate did with our exploration. The Book of Revelation speaks in an ever-present language, and invites us to life that is not confined and consumed in time. In verse 5 Christ is given three titles; "*Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.*" *The faithful witness* is the ever-present seer, the Divine presence that is aware of us. *The firstborn of the dead* enables us to contemplate life and being beyond the confines of our mortality. *The ruler of the kings of the earth* suggests that we consider again the reference point that we choose for our guidance and direction. Do we really believe the future is in the hands of our government?

The reading continues and invites us to invest the giving of glory in *him who loves us and freed us from our sins*. If, like Pilate, we could ask the question; "*Are you the King of the Jews?*" we can see that we would only be opening up a door to further questions and so too a

path that would be an ongoing quest. That quest is our calling into life's fullness, a life lived as the echo of Christ..

A couple of years ago in a coffee shop conversation on the politics of Nepal in Kathmandu a retired gentleman said; "The King is dead we now have to realise we are the King". He was speaking of a realisation of responsibility. When we claim we are "the body of Christ, we also by implication claim that we are the "King of Kings; and so our calling is to live ourselves into that reality. The Book of Revelation declares that, "*He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him*", and so our seeking is every when, everywhere and for everyone.

Next week we move into the season of Advent, we set out again like Magi, seeking the reality that is signified by a star, a heavenly body of light that shines for all to see. Perhaps this week we should begin by thinking of where we might start looking. Should we look at home, should we follow the signs of this world and head off to shopping centres or should we look in refugee camps?

And we might also consider the activity that will lead us forward. The magi will mount their camels and leave everything behind; they will only focus on the Heavenly body and the source of heavenly light. They will carry with them their most precious of gifts with the intention of giving. Might we each and all, join them on their Advent journey!

As the year comes to an end we have the anticipation, the promise and the reality of a new beginning. In the death of the past, we are drawn into the birth of the present and that will take us into the promise of tomorrow.

The Lord be with you

Peter Humphris