

Last Sunday after Pentecost and Christ the King

20 November 2016

[Jeremiah 23: 1-6; Psalm - Benedictus or Song of Zechariah; 1 Colossians 1: 11-20; Luke 23:33-43](#)
from Vanderbilt
[Christ the King / Reign of Christ C November 20, 2016](#) from Textweek

We are gearing up for Christmas along with everyone else and yet today's gospel comes straight out of the Easter narratives!

It makes us wonder about those who organised the lectionary, the table of readings we follow throughout the year; did they have an off day or was this in fact a deliberate choice with a specific purpose in mind?

Well, of course, there is a purpose in the selected text and that becomes obvious when we recognise that today is the feast of 'Christ the King'.

This very purpose does however betray a simple logic; and at the same time it illuminates a real treasure, perhaps an unconscious and even unintended insight.

First let's follow the simplicity of the lectionary selection, for then we can perhaps more fully appreciate the context for both the day, of Christ the King, and also the gospel reading itself.

Today is the last Sunday in the Church's liturgical year, the finale; and so quite fittingly we have 'Christ the King' to crown the whole of the liturgical year.

Remembering that the early Church was a reformation movement of, and within, the Jewish faith: just as Luther sought to reform the Catholic Church back in 1517: so the emerging first century Christians were seeking to realise a new understanding, and an evolutionary step forward in the faith of the Jewish tradition.

And we can appreciate that it would have been quite a challenge for the early Church to link the newly revealed insights of Christ to the tradition that everyone was already familiar with. In seeking to address and overcome the fear of change that always accompanies new thinking and new ideas the early church sought to reassure their early congregations by demonstrating that that Jesus and his teachings were integral parts of the familiar tradition.

As we can see from the first reading there was an expectation within the tradition of a new and an anticipated king;

“The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

And the early disciples saw in Jesus the fulfilment of this traditional expectation; Jesus was the expected king that the Hebrew people were waiting for, this was the promotional 'spin' that the early church used in order to sell the message of Christ to those who were steeped within the Hebrew tradition.

We will discover much more of this reformation 'spin' as we engage with the Christmas narrative; and songs like "Once in royal David's city" again underline the seamless logic that shows Christ as a prophetic inclusion and inherent expectation within the familiar faith tradition.

The naming of 'Christ the King', the crowning Messiah of Jewish expectation was a cornerstone of continuity that legitimised the reformation, and brought the new revelations of Christ into the existing tradition.

Now we can skip forward a few centuries to a more formalised Catholic Church and we can easily understand that choosing 'Christ the King' was a fitting finale for the Church year; but what biblical text would add theological authority to the whole idea of 'Christ the King'?

Well the only narrative of crowning and naming was of course within the Easter narrative and so we have today's gospel reading to authorise "Christ the King' within our tradition.

Now, if we consider the same thread but without the shackles of the previous Jewish tradition, we might well discern a very different outcome.

If the revelation of Christ is seen as a completely new paradigm, not as the fulfilment of the old paradigm; then we do not have to spin a narrative of Messiah, expected king or Son of David; rather we can perhaps appreciate a breaking out from the confines of the old tradition, a going beyond into a new and creative understanding of God, Humanity, the Creation and the very essence of life itself.

And we'll read the text somewhat differently as well;

"If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!":

well, he didn't save himself and so, QED, he was not and is not "king of the Jews".

As we leave behind the simplicity of the early Church logic and lectionary spin, we have an opportunity to consider the reading in the context of today, the end of the Church year.

And as we come to the end, so also we come to a beginning, and therefore a reference to Easter becomes quite insightful.

For as we know from the Easter narrative the old must die in order for the new to rise.

And here we are at the crossroads of the years, the old and the new equally balanced and we have the text:

"If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"

Now of course we can 'save' ourselves; we can hang on to what we have, we can take out insurance, we can save up wealth in case something goes wrong, we can keep others away so that we don't have to share; we can, we think, save ourselves; and most of us do, at the Commonwealth, the ANZ and many other institutions.

And in that 'saving' process, we can almost delude ourselves into thinking that nothing has changed, we are safe; yesterday and today and tomorrow; same, same, same, saved!

But we will also miss the true gift of Christmas, the process of Easter, the reality of dying and rising into a new a new creation; we will not even follow the criminal who hangs on the cross. If we hang on to what we have, our hands and our hearts cannot be open to the possibility of 'paradise'.

In the week ahead we enter the in-between and we will feel the equal forces of yesterday and tomorrow; we have an opportunity to hold on and we have an opportunity to let go, an opportunity to remember and an equal opportunity to dream.

Perhaps as the year is crowned with glory of "Christ the King" we might consider the 'crowning glory that each and all of us are given to make real.

Much of the secular world will rush headlong into Christmas as a birthday celebration, unaware that Christ is not the King, he's not the birthday boy; rather he is the gift, and Christmas might well be our birthday.

Peter Humphris