

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

Christ the King

(b-os 34)

21 November 2021

'Well, How Did you Become King Then?'

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

A lifetime ago, when I was a curate, there was a time when I regularly worked around 70-80 hours per week and rarely had a day off. At one point my supervisor gave me an additional set of tasks to perform. I asked him: "As I am already working 80 hours per week, what do you want me to stop doing so that I can take up these new duties?" His response was: "If the Kingdom of God requires you to work 100 hours per week you will work 100 hours!"

It was at this point I began to laugh and said: "Father, I have never been so stupid as to confuse the church with the Kingdom of God!". He walked off in a huff, but for me it was a moment of new insight. The church (as an institution) is a very human construct, manifesting human failure as well as achievement. Church institutions are functional constructs on the one hand, but yet are meant to give expression to the 'mystical body of Christ' on the other; but they are not that body in themselves.

Problems arise when human constructs sacralise themselves and make claims to a status that is demonstrably not true. We can see it when religious groups claim that they are the only ones to have the truth and that all others are wrong. It is also seen when the structure of a religious institution proclaims itself to be a manifestation of the divine order, and that everything else is fake. Such hubris is a sign of human sin and brokenness rather than of the Kingdom of God, but how does such conceit arise?

The Bible and Monarchy

In the beginning there was no monarchy nor any other system of government. The early chapters of Genesis describe the human and divine world in terms of relationship. If anything, life in the Garden of Eden was a proper theocracy where God ruled through love rather than by coercion. Nevertheless, the representative humans, Adam and Eve, wanted to exercise their God-given freedom, take authority for themselves, and go their own way. It resulted in them having to leave the Garden at which point the story turned to the first act of violence when Cain murdered his brother Abel. Thus arose the need for a political construct to control people.

Initially, the context for the governing of God's people was tribal and patriarchal. They were a nomadic people living across a tract of land, with each tribe having its own 'high-place' or religious centre. It is the Exodus story that eventually describes the beginning of a national consciousness through a shared narrative, yet the system remained tribal until there was a greater degree of settlement.

With a shift from herding to cropping came the capacity for settlement and the creation of towns with fortifications to protect the inhabitants. Living in close quarters and with a rise in wealth through trade came the need for a new system of control. Two issues needed to be addressed; first the ability to manage the behaviour of the inhabitants of the town, and second the means to defend the town – essentially 'keeping the peace' through law and 'defending the community' through war. Interestingly, little has changed in the business of politics since then.

While religious, legal, and patriarchal leaders had dominated the community up to this point the new situation gave rise to local warlords who controlled towns and the land around them. In time the various town communities realised that they could be more secure and successful if they worked together. Geography and culture became dominant factors in the formation of states with kings to rule over them.

Not all in Israel were happy with the transition to monarchy (or rule by one person). When the Israelites asked for a king, so that they could be like all the other nations around them, the Prophet Samuel warned against it saying:

'These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen... He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers... He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, ... And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.'

(1 Samuel 8: 11-18)

Despite Samuel's words, the people persisted in their desire for a king to lead the army in battle. So, Samuel anointed Saul to be king and Israel became like other nations – going to war, being taxed, and for the most part living under the rule of a tyrant. Likewise, their religion became an adjunct to the affairs of the state, for God also had a part to play in winning battles.

From then on God was often imagined in terms of 'kingship' and of 'sitting on his throne in heaven'. It was a theological shift that came to understand God in human terms of power, status, and wealth; and is an attitude that has continued through history. Human power and the capacity to inflict violence became equated with God, but it was not what God intended in the beginning. Something had to be done.

The Kingdom of God

Jesus came to reveal the ‘Kingdom of God’, which is not a place such as a nation state but rather is the rule of God in our hearts. Likewise, it is not a reign that is imposed by coercion or violence, but rather one demonstrated by love, self-sacrifice, and service. In this respect, the Kingdom of God is more a process rather than an event; likewise it transcends time by being both now and more fully in the future.

Jesus himself became the embodiment of the Kingdom through his service, self-sacrifice, and love. Moreover we, who are called to be his followers, share in that ministry by doing what he did. The church that reveals the Kingdom is therefore the mystical body of Christ continuing his work in the world; and consists of all the faithful, both living and departed. It is not the many institutional constructs that claim the name of ‘church’ but do not offer service, self-sacrifice, and love.

Our institutional churches should demonstrate the Kingdom of God, but history shows that too often they do not. Time and time again they have been a means for coercive control and abuse, being the cause of wars, harm, and persecution – even in our own times. As the Book of Revelation argues, God’s judgement stands against those who in God’s name have acted violently, been disingenuous, or bullied others.

So what does the Kingdom look like? The Gospel of Matthew recounts Jesus describing the Kingdom through a series of parables (Matthew 13). He taught that the Kingdom is available to everyone and that it is not our job to judge between those who belong and those who do not. They also teach that the Kingdom starts in a small way but grows into something large and of great value. God’s Kingdom is therefore different to the way of worldly kingdoms.

Are You King of the Jews?

Today’s Gospel reading recounts part of Jesus’ trial before the Roman Governor Pontus Pilate. Pilate, as representative of the Emperor, was the local embodiment of worldly power. He was concerned that Jesus might be seeking to lead an insurrection against Roman authority – which carries a charge of treason. The interrogation, however, did not take the usual course. Jesus did not claim worldly kingship or power, instead he talked of another kingdom ‘not of this world’.

The early Christians lived in a world dominated by Roman authority and power, and many of them faced persecution and violence at the hands of the state. The Gospel of John offered hope to those who were powerless and suffering oppression. The words of Jesus to Pilate offered them a way forward by having allegiance to a divine King who would make things right in the kingdom to come. Jesus therefore stood for a truth that was beyond worldly power and control.

Subsequently, Jesus was executed as a traitor. Those who had followed him fled and the terrible violence of the worldly kingdom destroyed him. But the story did not end there, for God raised him up to new life. Love, service, and self-sacrifice prevailed over human violence. The Kingdom of God came to be seen as a kingdom of peace where Christ reigns for eternity, and humanity is finally returned to the Garden of Eden to live under God's rule.

In this feast of Christ the King we celebrate the final triumph of Christ over death and violence. It is a triumph, however, that does not allow us to lord it over others but instead requires us to be the servant of all.

Epilogue

A final word. The ideas and language of monarchy, with kings, queens and nobles overseeing their subjects, has become somewhat anachronistic in our modern western world now governed by representative democracies. Yet the structures of power and status remain constant in society and democratic states today continue to use the threat of violence to keep the peace and defend their wider interests.

Yet, we still have a monarch of our own, Queen Elizabeth II. Although Parliament has taken away her powers, she has nevertheless continued to lead through an abiding sense of Christian service. She may not have much temporal power, but she does have immense moral authority, not only in Britain and the Commonwealth but also in the wider political world. As a monarch without power, her approach has been an inversion of realpolitik, which does not so much coerce or bully people but rather demonstrates the peace of another kingdom and encourages us to follow.