

26th Sunday after Pentecost: Reign of Christ/Christ the King

2 Sam 23: 1-7; Ps 12: 1-12; Rev 1 4b-8; **John 18 33-37**

This Sunday is like the church's New Year's Eve, the end of one era and the start of another, with Advent Sunday next Sunday.

This is the Sunday before the season when we remember – again – that God enters history as a vulnerable baby, born to an unwed mother, who was, in our terms, living on the poverty line.

But before we focus again on the baby Jesus we pause today, to remember that our God is also the God who formed planets and flung stars into space.

The roots of the festival of Christ the King – or the Reign of Christ as it used to be called – go back to 1925 when Pope Pius XI initiated it. It was a dark time. Nations were reeling from the devastation of “the war to end all wars” creating a vacuum in governance that terror rushed in to fill, like waves onto the shore.

Fascism, nationalism and extremism were on the rise across the world: Mussolini made a speech to the Italian Chamber of Deputies that was the turning point for his rise to power, Hitler was rebuilding the Nazi party and solidifying his role as absolute leader and in the USA the Ku Klux Klan held a march in Washington, D.C. that attracted 35,000 white supremacists. Domination and violence seemed rampant. The future was uncertain.

Perhaps not unlike our current context: Uncertainty and anxiety seem to have become hallmarks of our time: “Anti-vax” and anti-authority protests around the world; nationalism on the rise in Europe; In Australia, lies, lies about lies, denials of lies and denials of denials, Royal Commissions and enquiries plus *refusals* to hold commissions and enquiries... perhaps we are not quite the democracy we thought we were, dedicated to honesty, transparency, hard work and a fair go for everyone. The use of violence and domination by the powerful are alive and well. The future seems uncertain.

The world of the disciples was also one of domination and violence.

One in which the wealthy and powerful ruled over the weak with the sword and the whip. It was a world in which the Roman Caesar was both king and god, a cruel, irrational tyrant who exacted vengeance from his enemies.

History has known benevolent kings, but down to this day kingship is a word more associated with inherited wealth, power, privilege, hierarchy, and the destruction of one's enemies, than with humility and self-sacrifice. Witness the pervasive media coverage of the House of Windsor, particularly the members resident in the USA and a certain prince named Andrew.

So, what are we to make of this feast of Christ the King, and what was the Pope thinking when he instituted it?

We are told that Pope Pius wanted to remind the church of God's absolute rule over history. In his encyclical *Quas Primas*, he wrote that the kingdom to which Christians belong is "spiritual and concerned with spiritual things ... it demands of its subjects a spirit of detachment from riches and earthly things, and a spirit of gentleness. They must hunger and thirst after justice and more than this, they must deny themselves and carry the cross." ==

Thinking again about that historical period, with the benefit of hindsight we know how the Mussolini and Hitler stories turned out. Not so well. We know that a resurgent white nationalism lingers on in the USA, apparently emboldened by Trump. We know the issues that dominate the public discourse in this country.

And, what do we make of Pius' assertion that Christians are to be "concerned with spiritual things" in the face of the abuse of power, violence and terror? ==

Thinking about kingship and the Christ as king, what is very striking in today's Gospel reading is Jesus' ambivalence about being called a king.

In fact, in the 37 times that Jesus describes the reign of God in the Gospels, not once does he describe the kingdom of God as being like an earthly kingdom as his disciples would have understood it.

Lamps and debt. A friend in the night, and a Sower of seeds. Wine, nets, pearls, weeds, and treasure. What is the kingdom of God like?

It is like leaven, and it is like two sons; like bridesmaids and sheep, like workers and judges. But never like the Roman empire, the UK or even the Middle Kingdom.

Pilate questions Jesus keenly, anxious to know if he identifies himself as an alternative in opposition to Caesar's rule. In response, Jesus says: "You say that I am a king." Jesus is forced to speak in the language and imagery of politics and power that Pilate uses because he simply cannot imagine any other possibility.

In this Pilate is not alone. The disciples also think and speak in terms of kingship as they know it, arguing over who will sit at his left and right. So, Jesus tells them stories.

Repeatedly he paints a picture of an alternative style of kingdom *served* rather than *ruled* by a servant king, rooting the liberation of God in ordinary life, in what happens around us, not in throne rooms with princes and crowns but in baking bread and sowing seeds. In what has been described by theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz as "**kin-dom**" rather than "**kingdom**".

For her the kin-dom of God is about individual and community liberation, solidarity with the poor and oppressed by which "Christians become a significantly positive force in the unfolding of the kin-dom of God."

The kin-dom of God is now, worked out among us, our common commitments, our community spilling out into dismantling structures that bind and oppress. It begins in recognising that kin-dom is happening all around, not in other-worldly spirituality, but in concrete, positive life and witness.

I want to conclude with a prayer that Elizabeth found for the visit of Spicer on Friday, which speaks to our times:

A prayer for times of uncertainty

God of love,

We are not completely sure what is happening here. Things are still unfolding.

Is this an end or a new beginning? Is this a turning point, and in which direction?

We dare to ask you these questions because there are people we care about who are affected.

Help us to be clear and calm and supportive of each other as we go through this uncertain time.

We place our trust in you and pray that you will show us the light at the end of this tunnel.

Amen

References

- *Melissa Florer-Bixler 11-20-2018*; <https://sojo.net/articles/kin-dom-christ>
- *Seasons of the Spirit*
- *Eating with the Bridegroom*, John Shea, 2005, Liturgical Press
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