

Of cabbages and kings

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Christ the King, 25 November 2007

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Colossians 1.11-20; Luke 23.33-43

Amid all the politics of recent weeks, a bit of nonsense is helpful; nonsense like Lewis Carroll's verse, *The Walrus and the Carpenter*.

“The time has come,” the Walrus said (to the oysters that were soon to be his lunch)
“To talk of many things:
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—
Of cabbages—and kings—
And why the sea is boiling hot—
And whether pigs have wings.”

Whichever political party you supported yesterday, you might be waiting now to see whether pigs will fly. But before you have your lunch today, I won't ask you to think about pork barrels—or pigs in any form for that matter.

We have another topic that the Walrus proposed for pre-lunch discussion—kings ... and kingship, especially the kingship of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are many references in Scripture to royal titles and symbols. Today's text from Jeremiah prophesies an idyllic kingship, where God's people are well shepherded and their king will “deal wisely” and “execute justice and righteousness”. Under this king, “Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety.” It's a messianic vision, which we interpret as Christ in his kingdom.

Today, the idea of an all-powerful monarch doesn't fit well with our ideals of equality, independence and liberty. How then, today, do we understand Jesus as monarch? What should we do with this celebration of Christ the King?

The feast of Christ the King is much newer than traditional Christian festivals. It was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925, in the aftermath of World War I. The Pope's idea was to emphasise the all-embracing authority of Christ as a way to bring about peace and stability in the world. He exhorted politicians and nations to submit to the authority and obedience of Christ and, in the process, to submit to the guidance of the Roman church as the one source of salvation.

As first instigated by Rome, the feast of Christ the King was an anachronism. It reflected a form of imperialism that had been broken by the carnage of World War I—although it would take more war and most of the rest of the century before this was finally realised. The second Vatican Council revised the Roman church calendar, moving the celebration of Christ the King to the last Sunday before Advent. The festival has been taken up by other churches to celebrate Jesus' kingship in a rather different spirit from the original intention. Pope John Paul II said, and his successor Benedict XVI has repeated, that Christ's kingship is based not on “human power” but on love and the service of others.

From the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus proclaimed the nearness, the immediacy, of the kingdom of God; but Jesus' own lifestyle was not that of a typical king. People of his day were scandalised when he “ate with publicans and sinners” (Mk 2:15-17), because to sit at table with someone was to create fellowship with them. Jesus broke social, moral, and religious boundaries; he healed on the Sabbath, spoke of God as his Father, and counted women among his disciples.

The rulers of Jesus' day were about exploitation, power and prestige. Jesus despised worldly kingdoms. Rulers surrounded themselves with servants and courtiers; Jesus chose the poor and marginalized. Even from his cross, he heard the cry of a dying criminal.

The man said, "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." What was it that gave him a hope in Jesus?

The man had heard and seen Jesus, as Jesus cared for his mother and his disciple John at the foot of the cross. He had heard Jesus pray for God's forgiveness of his executioners. Perhaps the man had previously heard Jesus' speaking, or witnessed Jesus' actions.

The Gospels tell us that Jesus taught "as one having authority". (Mt 7.29 Mk 1.22). Jesus' words and actions gave him authority, and the dying man responded with a plea that he be remembered.

The words of some modern monarchs carry authority. When our Queen speaks from the heart (rather than as the formal mouthpiece of the government) many listen carefully. When the King of Thailand speaks, for example, the people and nation of Thailand respond, even though the King has little power to enforce his wishes.

When a true king speaks, people attend; they take serious note and they act. A king's authority comes from his words, but especially from who he is.

Jesus' kingly authority comes simply from who he is.

Because Jesus is who he is—the resurrected one, God himself—everything is his domain, his kingdom, as the letter to the Colossians proclaims so gloriously:

in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,
he himself is before all things,
in him all things hold together.

When the dying criminal spoke, he said "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Remembrance is important. When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, Exodus tells us that God remembered the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. When sins are forgiven, God remembers them no more. When we gather at the communion table, we eat and drink, as Jesus commanded, in remembrance of him.

Remembrance gathers together. It gathers—remembers—the forgotten and neglected and marginalized.

When he asked Jesus to remember him, the man on the cross was asking to be included in the kingdom. In the act of remembrance, through the communion of bread and wine, we are included with Christ and each other in his Kingdom.

Jesus spoke of the immediate coming of the Kingdom of God. He gave no opportunity for hesitation, postponement or delay. When he called his disciples, they were there and then to leave their nets and follow him (Mt 4:20). "Follow me," he said on another occasion, "and let the dead bury their own dead" (Mt 8:22).

Jesus emphasised repeatedly that the Kingdom of God, and consequently his kingship, is for the here and now, as well as in the glory to come.

This is the last Sunday before Advent, the last Sunday before a new church year. It's an opportunity to reflect on our part, during the year, in the here and now of the kingdom of Christ.

As we emphasise at St. Philip's, and as I've said again here, Jesus' life and teaching about the Kingdom speak overwhelmingly of inclusion, of an invitation to come in, to be welcome in God's family, to be remembered as God's children.

So as we come to the end of this church year, the challenge to us at St. Philip's, therefore, is to attend to the authority of Jesus' kingship and ask ourselves whether the way we live individually and together as church—the things that we do and say—put into practice Jesus' invitation to come in, to be welcome, to be included.

Do we do the work of mission? Do we welcome others, do we invite others, do we encourage others, do we go out and seek others to be part of God's family, to be remembered as part of the Kingdom of Christ?