

The Power of a True King

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Christ the King — Year C — 20 November 2022

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Jeremiah 23.1-6; Song of Zechariah; Colossians 1.11-20; Luke 23.33-43.

Imagine, a grocer from an unfashionable suburb slips through the back door of a wealthy brother's house, in say, Mugga Lane, at the crack of dawn to share in the breaking of bread in the drawing room—a brief, quiet event, overshadowed by the knowledge that if they would be discovered they would face at least penal servitude for life, and very likely worse. This is what 'going to church' was like in the first or second century. Any Christian in the early Church knew that, even if things were relatively peaceful, it was always possible that a suspicious government or government official would crack down. The 'deacons', the ministers who looked after the doors, were charged with scrutinizing everyone who came in very carefully; you'd need to know who your companions were, literally who you were breaking bread with, if your life depended on them.

But when St Paul wrote to the Romans in chapter 13, he says 'let everyone be subject to the governing authorities'; Peter says something similar in one of his letters. It seems that they both believed that governing authorities are necessary for keeping the peace; neither of them advocated anarchy or chaos. But there were limits to this subjection, and to varying degrees the Church throughout the centuries has tested those limits.

When these early Christians, many of them domestic slaves, were brought before the magistrates many would say that they were quite happy to pray for the imperial state, and even to pay taxes, but that they could not grant the state their absolute allegiance. They had another loyalty; they had no desire to overthrow the administration, no anarchy, but there were certain things they would not do. They would not worship the emperor, and some refused to serve in the Roman army. They asked from the state what had been reluctantly conceded to the Jews—exemption from the *religious* requirements of the empire.

King of kings and Lord of lords is often how Jesus is described. If all this masculine language is difficult, just sing the Hallelujah chorus ... it's easier, it slips off the tongue! These early Christians believed that if Jesus of Nazareth was 'Lord and King' no one else could be lord over him, and therefore no one could overrule his authority. The Roman authorities didn't really know what to do with these folk, it was on the one hand a deeply political community, posing a very specific challenge by saying that the state was a provisional reality—on the other hand they lived as part of it, they said it was deserving of respect and they were compliant in the ordinary affairs of social life. But these early Christians said that the state had no ultimate claim, no ultimate power or authority over them.

When Pliny the Younger, the Roman governor of Bithynia and Pontus wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan around AD 112, he was unsure what to do with these folk. He told Trajan that they meet on a certain day before light where they gather and sing hymns to Christ as to a god. They all bind themselves by oath, and pledge *not* to commit any crimes such as fraud, theft, or adultery, and subsequently share a meal of 'ordinary and innocent food.' Subversive behaviour indeed!

The Romans were concerned with keeping the peace, *Pax Romana*; but their means for securing peace were brutal, as Tacitus put it: they make a desert and they call it peace. They were concerned with the status quo, but this is not the peace which passes all our understanding. This is not the peace that we strive for. We might be quite happy to pray for

the officers of state—I hope we do, we pay our taxes, we are good citizens, we are no anarchists, we're Anglicans after all (!), but this is not what Christian faith is all about. This peace that we seek is in its own way subversive, it challenges the status quo, it challenges us. The innocuous meal that Pliny mentions, a meal of 'ordinary and innocent food' was nothing of the sort. It was an act through which the early Church demonstrated its power, challenged the status quo and the church has continued to demonstrate this power through the millennia.

On any given Sunday, in churches around the world, people eat and drink with others they ordinarily wouldn't eat or drink with in any other situation. An elderly white South African woman, who remembers when whites and blacks had separate suburbs, swimming pools and seats on buses, drinks from the same Eucharistic chalice as the young black man next to her. This is powerful, and it subverts the political, economic, and social world that we inhabit. Apartheid in all its many forms exists today, the Eucharist has the power to bring it down should we be prepared to unleash it.

This is the power we celebrate today, this is why we claim Christ is King with all the sense of authority that that epithet brings. But it a title that is nailed to a cross. It is a tile that bookends the gospels. When the Magi came to seek out Jesus, they asked 'where is the child born King of the Jews', and we know what happened then, what carnage that brought as Herod saw his so-called authority challenged. There is a cost associated with this power—take up your cross.

What we are engaged in is what we might call theopolitical power. It is the paradoxical costly power of sacrifice, of the cross; it is the humble power of bread broken into pieces for the purpose of sharing; it is the washing of feet that means a life of service to one another; it is the power of giving one's life for the other. In other words, this is the theopolitical power of love.

It is this power that Jesus wields as our King, a power that we gladly and gratefully submit to. There is a great blessing in this submission, because in doing so we recognise that it is not that we reconcile ourselves with God; it is God who through Christ reconciles us to himself. All things...all of us, all creation, this is the power of love, the power of a true King. Amen.