

Christ the King Year B 2021

'Are you the King of the Jews?' the Roman Governor asks the shackled prisoner. He probably expects this unwashed peasant to throw himself on the ground, protest his innocence, and ask for mercy. Instead he is faced with dignity, and in a way, accusation. 'Did someone suggest this to you; make up your own mind; who put you up to this?' We can imagine Jesus looking Pilate in the eye, and which one of them looks away first? Not the one who, in the opening verses of the Book of the Revelation is called 'the faithful witness, the first born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth'.

On this Sunday - the last before Advent - the one we call Christ the King - the text from Revelation puts the Lordship of God and his Son front and centre. We cannot avoid it - as if we would want to. But perhaps some of those for whom the seer of Patmos, John the Theologian, is writing, they might be tempted, because they are under Imperial threat - so John proclaims that with God, there is always more to come. God IS, God WAS, and God is STILL TO COME. Don't think for one moment it is all over. Don't think for one moment that Imperial Rome will have the last word.

Pilate thought Rome had had the last word in a petty local dispute which might have ended, if he had not intervened, in a riot. To avoid a riot he sacrifices a man he knows to be innocent - but what is one man set against relative peace and his political career? He hadn't reckoned that death would be followed by resurrection; he hadn't reckoned with Jesus laying down his life in order to take it up again.

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'I think it is all over' says Pilate. 'Thank goodness it is all over' say the Jewish authorities - those who had agreed that it was 'better that one man die than the people perish'. But it is not all over yet, says God. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end - and we haven't got to the end yet; and my finger is still in this - and in every - pie.

So the man who stands bloodied and shackled before the representative on the most important and powerful man on earth, as they knew it, this man looks Pilate in the eye and says 'my kingdom is not from here'. Pilate clearly doesn't understand. There is, as far as he is concerned, only one kind of kingdom - dominance, force, subjection, exploitation - a bit like the British Empire - well, perhaps more than a bit! The kingdom of Jesus is

no threat to Rome in a military sense. Pilate knows that, the religious leaders know that - but the subversive threat to the political system, both Roman and Jewish, putting loyalty to God over loyalty to the state - now, that is a threat. (Think about the number of protestant religious leaders and theologians who suffered and died under the Nazi terrors). This is not just an ancient text; it is still a living reality today.

Jesus says 'Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice'. Do we listen to his voice? Do we belong to the truth? Are we, like him, faithful witnesses?

If Pilate had witnessed to the truth, he would have released Jesus, but, for Pilate, expediency was more important than truth - indeed, he goes on to ask 'what is truth?' And the answer today, just as much as then, is that truth comes from an unsheathed sword (or today, from the barrel of a gun). Truth is whatever suits those in charge.

As the Passion of Christ gets under way, Jesus has to witness to his own truth - he remains stubborn in his trust of the Father in spite of the catcalls of his accusers and the silence of his absence friends. He may wonder where all the witnesses to truth have gone. Does he wonder today where all the witnesses to

truth have gone? He may wonder why you get pushed around so much for the sake of the kingdom. We may wonder why so many people think faith is so irrelevant, as they worship the gods of consumerism, self-importance, advancement, wealth. That is what a kingdom FROM this world looks like. But Jesus says 'my kingdom is not from this world'. Of course it isn't. When we pray 'Your kingdom come on earth as in heaven' we are not praying for a kingdom FROM this world, but for something completely different. In John's Gospel 'the world' is the source of evil and rebellion towards God. Jesus' kingdom is FOR the world, not FROM the world. That is the crucial distinction.

Pilate, of course, can only see things from a this-worldly perspective - what is truth? My power against your weakness, my cross against your body. And Jesus response is - my kingdom is not imposed, my kingdom does not use coercion. My kingdom is not FROM this world.

This is not a rupture between what is spiritual and what is temporal, not 'pie in the sky when you die', but meanwhile carry on as normal. The distinction is between domination, arbitrariness and privilege, and love, justice, service.

'For this I came into the world', Jesus tells Pilate, to inaugurate a world of peace and fellowship, of justice and respect for other people, of love for God and for one another. This is his kingdom which comes into human history, into the world, enhancing it and leading it beyond itself, a kingdom now and yet to come. It is not limited to the past - that by-gone golden age - it is not limited to the present and nor is it limited to the future. It is, it was, it is to come.

Jesus bears witness to that truth; he demonstrates God's desire to love. If we listen to the voice of Jesus we belong to the truth and we are made to be 'a kingdom and priests serving the Father'.

Jesus and the kingdom he proclaims are the source and the ultimate meaning of our lives, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, a kingdom for the world, a kingdom of love, mercy, peace. And we are his ambassadors.