

THE SERMON FOR CHRIST THE KING, November 24th, 2019.

Jeremiah 23: 1-6; Song of Zechariah; Colossians 1: 11-20 & Luke 23: 33-43

I don't know whether you are a republican or a monarchist, whether you hold strong views or not about the status of Australia. I guess it depends on which side of the fence you sit as to what your views on a kingdom and a king might be.

Today is the last Sunday in the Church's year, and next Sunday we will be celebrating the first Sunday of Advent, the first Sunday in a new church year. Traditionally on this last Sunday, we celebrate the feast of Christ the King or (the more politically correct perhaps), the Reign of Christ. Whichever, Christ as our King!

We pray at least every week, maybe every day: "... your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven". I wonder what kind of kingdom we are expecting, what we are praying for!

This morning's readings either point to God's active participation in bringing about the kingdom, or point to Jesus' in connection to the kingdom.

In our first reading, the prophet Jeremiah is bemoaning the evil the kings were doing in the world, 'scattering and destroying' God's flock. He goes on to prophecy that God will raise up one from David's descendants who will reign wisely, execute justice and righteousness in the land.

Today instead of the Psalm we have the Song of Zechariah, that great song of joy which Zechariah recites after the birth of his son, John. John who would be 'the prophet of the Most High', who would go before him to prepare the way for him, a way of repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

Paul's letter to the Colossians talks about the inheritance that is ours and how God 'has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son'.

Our Gospel this morning is most provoking. It seems very strange that at this time of year we hear the story of the crucifixion. Just before this, we would read Jesus' encounter with Pilate when he asks Jesus, 'are you the king of the Jews?' Jesus' response was, 'you say so!' What sort of response is that you may well ask! Elsewhere he says, 'my kingdom is not of this world', but that was enough for Pilate. When Jesus was led away to be crucified at Golgotha, the inscription above the cross, normally the place which would list his crimes, read in three different languages, "This is the King of the Jews".

Beside Jesus, as he died, were crucified two criminals. One berates him that if he is who he has said he was, save himself and him. Jesus ignores him, as the other criminal launches into a defense, which ends with those words which echo down the centuries; 'Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom'. Jesus' response: 'truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise'. Such words of grace and mercy in extreme times!

Such a strange time to place these Scriptures before us, isn't it? Or is it? Soon we will find ourselves in Advent waiting – waiting to Prepare the Way of the Lord, the King. We will once again hear the words from the prophets of the promise of a Messiah, of a Wonderful Counsellor, of the Prince of Peace. In the weeks ahead, we will look into a manger as we have done year after year and call this baby 'the Newborn King'. We will hear an angel proclaim that Good News has been born into this world. A Saviour. Christ, the Lord. And yes, again the heavens will explode with "Glory Be to God" from the heavenly host, right on cue! But this day, before we step into a time of Advent waiting or look into the face of the Infant Jesus, we find ourselves standing at the foot of the cross and overhearing words of grace and mercy. We look into Jesus' face. We remember him telling us to look at his own

birth in a different way. "My kingdom is not from here. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Kingdom words from the King whose birth we will soon celebrate.

Today, we too look into the face of Jesus the Christ as we prepare in the coming weeks to look into the face of a newborn king. We can understand the confusion as to this kingship. The King we worship wore the most unlikely of crowns. It was brow-piercing. His "royal" robe was placed around his shoulders with mocking allegiance and later gambled away. His sceptre was a shepherd's staff. His royal chalice was filled to overflowing with forgiveness. Our King was lifted high by human hands, not on an elevated throne, but on a cross. Yes, this is Christ the King, the One who proclaims the kingdom of God to be on this earth. As he walked with his disciples then and as he walks with us now, we hear his kingdom words. "Love the Lord your God. Love your neighbour as yourself. Forgive them. My Peace I give to you. Follow me. Pray this way. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Our King kneels at the feet of all, both leader and servant by example, with commands to go and do likewise. Kingdom words. This is a reign different from any other.

In a way, these kingdom thoughts are unsettling for it requires of us to consider who Jesus is in our lives. Within both a democracy and monarchy, the people hope for an easier way of life. Within this life of a disciple and Christ-follower, we find that this kingdom goes against any of the little kingdoms of ease of beliefs and responses that we have built for ourselves. I choose to follow this King. I want to follow his example ... to be an instrument of justice and grace and mercy. Yes, I choose to follow this King even though it would be much easier not to ... for with this choice, comes the picking up of my cross, daily.

For our King leads by example and expects us to follow. Our king kneels on a dirty floor and washes feet, who pours out hope and grace and mercy, intermingled in his blood! So, as Christ-followers, we follow our King into the world where he has overturned society's expectations on their head; the last being first, and the first last, where the rich care for the poor, and forgiveness and love is available to all.

I close with a quote from Mother Teresa, which has echoes of the prayer attributed to St Francis, words of the upside-down kingdom:

When I am hungry, send me someone in need of food.
When I am thirsty, send me someone needing a drink.
When I am cold, send me someone to warm.
When I am grieved, offer me someone to console.
When my cross grows heavy, let me share another's cross too.
When I am poor, lead me to someone in need.
When I have no time, give me someone I can help a little while.
When I am humiliated, let me have someone to praise.
When I am disheartened, let me have someone to cheer.
When I need people's understanding, give me someone who needs mine.
When I need to be looked after, send me someone to care for.
When I think only of myself, draw my thoughts to another.

Amen.

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