

2 Samuel 23:1-7
Revelation 1:4b-8
John 18:33-37

Theme ‘Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world”.’ (John 18:36a)

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Introduction

Today, the Sunday before Advent, marks the last Sunday in the liturgical year; next Sunday begins the new year. *This* Sunday is traditionally called the Feast of **Christ the King**, anticipating the one who will *come* in victory at the end of the age to judge all things.

Our readings for this day reflect the theme of **kingship**.

- In the **OT** David, regarded as the model of kingship, through whom God speaks and on whose tongue is God’s word, is portrayed as the one who rules over people justly.
- From the book of **Revelation** the writer to the seven churches expresses the grace and peace from God and from Jesus Christ, the *ruler of the kings of the earth*.
- And the Gospel, ending the readings from Mark, puts before John’s portrayal of Jesus being interrogated by Pilate—‘Are you the King of the Jews?’—and Jesus’ equivocal reply.

What are we to make of **Christ the King**? Permitted by the lectionary to be politically correct, we may now avoid the suspect term ‘*king*’ and talk simply about the *reign* of Christ. I confess that I’m not concerned here with political correctness. Whilst in Australia I am a republican – not favouring an absentee monarch and not wanting to invent a new Australian monarchy – in the Netherlands, the country of my birth, I am happy to be a *monarchist*. So I, for one, will not skirt around the Christ the **King**! In any case, the Gospels—two of them—will not allow it!

The Gospel of John

Our focus is the fourth Gospel. • Early in the Gospel (ch 6) the crowd wants to make Jesus king; but he manages to avoid it by heading to the mountains. • In ch 12 he is welcomed with palm branches as the King of Israel. • In ch 18 Pilate asks him whether he *is* in fact the King of the Jews. He doesn’t get a satisfactory answer but claims to find no fault in Jesus; he then proposes to release ‘the King of the Jews’. • In ch 19 Pilate incites the crowd by introducing Jesus—dressed in purple and wearing a crown (but made of thorns!)—to them as ‘your King’. • Finally, the irony reaches its climax when

Pilate puts on the cross the inscription, ‘Jesus the Nazorean, the King of the Jews’.

Pilate, who chooses friendship with Caesar over friendship with God, plays the philosopher with his question, *What is truth?*, but with the deepest irony he names the very truth that he does not perceive. *Are you the King of the Jews?* You *are* a King, then! Behold your King! Even the inscription on the cross testifies to it—in three languages!

But what kind of king? Everything hangs on this. He is not a king in the usual sense. He has no royal pretensions in the political or military sense. He does not command as kings command. He does not exercise power as they do. His kingship is not upheld by military power, neither that of his own people nor that of the imperial overlord.

My kingdom is not from this world, says Jesus. [‘Not *from*’ is far better here than ‘not *of*’.] In other words, his **kingship**, his **authority**, comes not from anything or anyone in this world; it comes from God. It comes from his being the one *sent by the Father*, the *Logos* (Word) who took flesh and became one of us, the *Son of the Father*, who is inseparable from the Father. All along in this fourth Gospel, it is the Father’s word that Jesus speaks; it is the Father’s works that Jesus does; it is the Father’s will that Jesus serves. And it is the Father’s authority that Jesus exercises. He does not take it; it is *given* to him—by the Father.

Implicitly, it is also the Father’s truth that Jesus testifies to. Pilate does not understand that kind of truth. He represents the world of *political* deals and compromise, in which truth does not get much of a look in! His concern is with *political truth*, while Jesus’ concern is with *another kind of truth* altogether: the truth that sets people free, the truth that exposes lying and deception, the truth that restores our humanity.

Jesus Christ Pantocrator

To speak of **Christ the King** is to unpack the *symbol* of **Christ** ascended into heaven and seated at the right hand of the Father, as we affirm in the Nicene Creed. It is about **authority**. It is about the **reign** or **rule** of Christ.

In a church that thinks of itself as a *democracy*—*rule* by the **people**—we don’t think much about the *rule* of Christ; we don’t think *anyone* should rule, except we ourselves. The *Basis of Union* doesn’t actually allow us to think like this! In one of its finest phrases, it says that Christ, ‘in his own strange way’, ‘constitutes, rules and renews’ his church.

What this ‘*strange way*’ is we will come to; it clearly implies something utterly *different* from the way that power and authority are exercised in the political world of communities and nations, even families! Let me simply say, for now, that there is nothing in our Uniting Church tradition, nor that of

its three parent traditions, that is *hostile* to the idea of the rule of Christ—the *kingly* rule of Christ—in and over the church. Our *hostility* to this idea comes [wrongly] from some other ideology and [understandably] from the abuse of authority to which all exercise of authority is susceptible.

But let me suggest another symbol: the symbol of Christ, the ruler of all. The book of Revelation describes Christ as ‘the ruler of the kings of the earth’. One of the favourite **icons** of the Eastern Orthodox Church is of **Christ Pantocrator**. In many Orthodox churches there is an icon of Christ, the ruler of all, sometimes in the central dome or on the ceiling. One hand is held up in blessing; the other is holding a (closed) book of the Gospels, suggesting that Christ *rules* through the Gospel, through his word. The **oldest** of these icons that has survived comes from the 6th century, preserved against attack in St Catherine’s monastery in the *Sinai* desert.

If (in evangelical or pietistic communities) we sometimes speak too subjectively about Jesus Christ—me and Jesus—this icon speaks of the **cosmic Christ**, Christ the ruler of all: all people, all things. The Orthodox church has a better sense of this than the Western church, especially Protestant churches. It captures the sense that Christ is not simply the captain of our souls but that he is victorious over everything that is hostile to him or indifferent to him. It is not a victory won by military conquest, by force of arms. It is not a victory won in terms of the large number of Christians in the world. It is a victory won through his resurrection from the dead and his exaltation to the right hand of the Father.

We do **not yet** see this victory in worldly terms. The world is still in thrall to powers that destroy and disintegrate. It still has its time to run. Its kings and rulers still fight their battles, oppress their people, and let half the world go hungry every day. That does **not** suggest the victory of *Christ Pantocrator*.

But the image of **Christ the King** reminds us that we live from this victory nonetheless. We see it through the eyes of *faith* and *hope*. If we had icons here, it would be pictured for us and remind us of its heavenly reality which, as the book of Revelation especially tells us, will come down from heaven. For he is announced to us as the **alpha** and the **omega**, the **first** and the **last**. *He* it is who will have the last word. His *kingdom* it is that will have no end. His *rule* it is that will prevail.

Christ rules his church through the Gospel

And what are we to say about the (kingly) rule of Christ in his **church**? This ‘ruler of the kings of the earth’, the **Pantocrator**, has ‘made **us** to be a kingdom’ (Rev 1:6). Not only do ‘all things hold together in him’, but he is, as the letter to the Colossians has it, ‘the head of the body, the **church**’. (1:18)

It is **not** the case, I think, that he is *already* the ruler of the church but *not yet* the ruler of the world. When churches are separated and divided can we speak of the *rule of Christ*? Do not other rulers

prevail: the rule of ego, of power, of ideology, or culture, or of legalism or libertarianism? The church is not yet the kingdom of Christ, though we may hope to be a **sign** of it, an ambiguous and broken sign, but nonetheless an *anticipatory* sign. We may hope to be an **instrument** of it, because Christ is able to make us his instruments in our very brokenness.

Christ's rule, already established in heaven, at the right hand of the Father, **breaks in** even when we do not expect it: when the *Gospel* finds its mark in us, when his *love* transforms us despite our patterns of resistance. Christ's kingship **breaks in** from heaven into our earthly lives when we hear his voice and discern his word; and in a complex world that is sometimes much more difficult than we realise, and sometimes much more simple than we think!

We cannot be sure in advance that in relation to any particular matter we will '*read*' Christ's rule—i.e. interpret his will—aright, let alone do so consistently. When serious and informed people disagree sharply on what the Gospel really *is* and what it *implies*, we cannot complacently think that *we* are certain to 'get it right'.

But we may **hope** to discern the nature of Christ's kingly rule—and how this *forms* and *informs* our own life and work together, because of his promise not to leave us in the lurch; not to leave us *bereft* of guidance and strength. That directs our hope and confidence to **him**, not to ourselves. For when we gather around his word and around his table, and are nourished and challenged again and again with his living presence, it is **he** who bears witness to **himself**. Without that we might as well give up!

If **Christ** is **King**, the ruler of the kings of the earth, then no authority can displace **his**; all other authorities are *relativised*. That is a hard word! But it is also a liberating word; for in his service we are promised freedom, our *true* freedom.

Thanks be to God.