

Christ the King

A sermon by Tom Frame (26/11/17)

Today is the last Sunday in the church calendar. Next week is a new year as we begin the season of Advent. The theme for today is a celebration of Jesus as King – a kingdom that is still coming – as we begin to think of the great Advent themes of love, joy, peace and judgement ... and to reflect on the prospect of the second advent – Christ's return. I am reminded of a t-shirt that one of my trainee clergy wore at St Mark's. It featured a picture of Jesus, very much like the Turing Shroud image, with the caption 'Jesus is coming ... look busy'. Today is a day when we are meant to encourage each other with the continuing reality of God's presence, when we remind ourselves that Christ is our King and we are citizens of heaven although presently resident on earth. It is a day when we draw close to Advent, the holy season in which we prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus at Christmas. And as we think of King Jesus coming at Christmas, so we welcome him into our hearts and to our worship.

You might think that's an odd thing to be doing at this time of the year. Thinking of Christ as King should surely be a post-Easter theme? But there is a certain logic. This is the end of the year and what was the point and purpose of Jesus' mission? It was to proclaim the sovereignty of God and the coming of the coming. So we end the year on a high note before we are reminded of the low beginnings of this unlikely story.

But the notion of Christ the King is troubling. Many countries have discarded their monarchies and those that remain are largely symbolic and powerless. But if we think further, most conventional ideas of kingship and royalty do not seem to apply them to Jesus – privilege, birthright, blue blood, wealth, and power. Nevertheless, Christ's kingship – or shall we say Christ's *rule* – is a vital aspect of Christian doctrine, and we must think very carefully about what it does and does not mean. It was, after all, one of the most common, most powerful early Christian images of the risen Christ. The art of the catacombs, of icons and of Byzantine imagery, was usually preoccupied much more with the idea of Christ glorified and ruling in heaven than it was with the suffering Jesus on the cross. The first Christians chose to dwell on the triumph of the resurrection and the hope they placed in that triumph. This is the image we have before us in the sanctuary window.

Only later, in the high middle ages, did the crucifix, with its graphic depiction of Jesus' suffering, come to be the dominant image, at least in Western Europe. This explains why many churches, including our own cathedral in Goulburn, have the crucifixion as the main image above the altar, the one you see when you enter, and the resurrection or ascension in the rear window, above the door which you see as you depart. The two events had to be

placed in their correct order. You cannot understand the resurrection until you grasp the crucifixion.

And there is another perhaps awkward reverse message. As soon as you talk about Christ's kingdom you have to remember Jesus' servanthood. He was king but a servant king. He is reigning with glory in heaven but here on earth with us on earth. All powerful, as son of God, but stretched into the weakest possible state of the human condition, a battered body nailed to a cross. A man whose divine mission is the very reverse of a display of human power – rather, a journey into defeat and failure. In thinking about Christ as king, we have to throw off the idea of pomp, of luxury, of the distance and aloofness of earthly rulers. Our language, like all human language, when it tries to capture even a portion of the complexity of the mysteries of faith, is bound to fail us. In order to understand better this kingship of Christ, we have to turn to consider more concrete things, like God's solidarity with those who are marginalised or pitied in our society – the theme of the reading from John chapter 6. For here Jesus does something apparently trivial – he gives thanks, he breaks bread – and yet through this simple action something full of moment and authority comes into being. Yes, he performs a miracle, so the gospel tells us – five loaves and two fishes feed five thousand. But more to the point is what is implied in the fact that they're there in the first place. They have come to him to be fed, and in a situation in which nothing realistically can be expected, they *are* fed. This is a king for a kingdom not of military rule or regal pomp, but for nourishing the lives of ordinary people, in all their complexity and brokenness. You can sense it even in those simple, brief words – “Jesus then lift up his eyes, and saw a great company come unto him”.

It is only a few verses on in the Gospel of John that we find Jesus saying this of himself: “I am the bread of life; they who come to me will not hunger, and they who believe in me will never thirst”. (John 6.35) In the long perspective of time, the feeding of the five thousand opens out into the feeding of the great company of the faithful across all time, who have come to the Lord's table to be fed on the bread of life. And so over the ages thousands upon thousands, millions upon millions, have come to be fed by this king whose kingdom, he would say to Pilate, is not of this world - yet it is a kingdom *for* this world, and offered up as a contradiction of the fantasies of power and might that rule our world.

The kingship of Jesus rests not on a blaze of royal bling – robes and rings – but on the humiliation of self giving through death, to feed and to save all who will come to him – whatever their status or condition, their triumphs or their failures. It's like, to take another example, the movement of Bach's St John Passion, which begins in a great shout of acclamation – “Lord! Lord! Our redeemer whose glory fills the world” and ends in an astonishingly quiet, reflective yearning, contemplating the tomb of Jesus – “Rest well! Rest well your sacred limbs, no more will I lament you. Rest, and lead me to your peace.”

In the end, the kingship of Christ is just another image – a partial, hopelessly limited and misleading way of trying to say things that pass beyond the power of human speech. But have no doubt about the reality on which it rests. Thousands upon thousands still come to him, a great company, yearning to be fulfilled here where they can be fed with the bread of life. And so it is fitting that here too we can come to be fed, and then proceed into the world with his works in our minds and his words on our lips – to make a difference, to proclaim a kingdom and the restoration of all things. Is that what we will do?

The feast of Christ the King has another name. It is based on the collect for the week which we heard earlier in the service. This is effectively a nickname and its draws on the first line of the collect – a collect that first appeared in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer: ‘Stir up O Lord the will of thy faithful people’. The last day of the church’s calendar is also called ‘Stir Up Sunday’ which was also a reminder to stir up your Christmas pudding in preparation for the great celebration on 25 December. We all need to be stirred, to be roused from apathy, to chastened from indifference. The things we say we believe, the things to which we assert a commitment, these things can sometimes recede into the background, out of our consciousness in a place where they make little difference to what we say or do. Being ‘stirred up’ can mean being unsettled, made anxious if our hearts were dull or alert if our minds were asleep.

We all need to be stirred up, to be moved, to be energised, to be challenged ... and our communion service does that each month by inviting us to confess our sins, to turn away from them, to embrace a new life and to proclaim the coming rule of God. But the words of the liturgy are sometimes too familiar, too well known and easily recited from memory rather than from the heart. So don’t leave today without being provoked, being prodded or being stirred – ahead of the season of Advent when we are reminded that Christ is coming at a moment and in a manner that we will not expect – and be ready for him. Amen.