

St Nicholas' Anglican Church, Mordialloc, Sunday 24th November, 2019 (Christ the King/Last Sunday after Pentecost)

Revd Dr Sharne Rolfe, Vicar

Readings:

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalm 46

Colossians 1:11-20

Luke 23:33-43

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Sermon: On glory, greatness, power, authority?

Today we celebrate the feast of Christ the King, marking the end of the long season of Sundays after Pentecost. The feast of Christ the King is a relatively new feast in the western liturgical calendar. It comes from an encyclical of the Roman Catholic Pope Pius XI, written in 1925, entitled *Quas Primas*, or "*In the First*". An encyclical is a letter written by the Pope to his Bishops, and this one is concerned with what ought to come first in this world. Behind it lies the rise of fascism and communism in Europe and a context where emerging secularism was believed to be eroding Christian belief. In effect, *Quas Primas* was a response by the Roman Church to the world's increasing secularization and nationalism. Pope Pius XI wrote: "While nations insult the beloved name of our Redeemer by suppressing all mention of it in their conferences and parliaments, we must all the more loudly proclaim his kingly dignity and power, all the more universally affirm his rights."

In response to the phenomenon of nations claiming more authority over the Church, the Pope also asserted the Roman Church's right to be free from secular authority. He wrote, "the Church, founded by Christ as a perfect society, has a natural and inalienable right to perfect freedom and immunity from the power of the state ... she cannot be subject to any external power." And so the feast of Christ the King was established.

Some of you, but of course not all of you, may feel a little uneasy about this conflating of Jesus and regal power. The inherited wealth, the prestige, the power – it can all seem so wrong from a Christian perspective. For example, in his sermon at St Paul’s Cathedral, London, on the feast of Christ the King just two years ago, Reverend Canon Chris Chivers said, “This feast of Christ the King is a somewhat strange affair ... the danger with such a feast is that we buy into one of the church's besetting sins which is a tendency to lapse too easily into proclamatory, triumphalist mode”. But, on the other hand, many Australians believe that the British royal family, at least, has achieved things that are worthy of admiration: Queen Elizabeth’s selfless commitment to her role, and strong testament to her Christian faith; the way in which the current Duke and Duchess of Cambridge have attempted, with some apparent success, to break down some of the barriers of privilege and difference, and strike bonds with younger people throughout the world.

But still, we may bring an unease to our worship this morning – why are we celebrating a feast of Christ the King? How comfortable are we with this image of the Kingly Christ, and all this means for our faith, and our conceptions of God and of Jesus? Do regal images have a place at all in the Christian way of life?

Our reading from Colossians certainly uses them: “May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power.” (1:11) “He has transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son.” (1:13) “...in him all things in heaven and on earth were created ... thrones, dominions, rulers, powers” (1:16) Power, kingdom, thrones, dominions, rulers. All very regal images. And in our Gospel text from Luke today, Jesus is proclaimed King of the Jews, albeit in a horrible, mocking manner. Is this how you usually think of Jesus? As a king, regal, all-powerful? I would have to say it’s probably not my preferred image. When I think of Jesus, what more often comes to my mind is the human image, a tired young man, out on the road, proclaiming the Word of God to those gathered around him, risking, even provoking the anger and indignation of those in authority, of those with power and privilege. I think of his sedition – words and actions that would in the end see this young man - so gentle, so humble, so full of loving-kindness, compassion and forgiveness – that would see him brought to a terrible death, a death that seemed for a time to be the death of all he stood for, all he revealed in his own life, all he spoke of so passionately to those with ears to listen.

As we delve deeper and deeper into our scriptures, Christ's version of kingship becomes very obvious. Power and privilege, of the kind that accompanies most royal households, was something that Jesus spoke against in many quarters. The kingship Scripture speaks of is no kingship defending power and privilege, no sovereign rule that makes the rich richer, the strong stronger, those with power even more powerful. Matthew's Gospel in particular cuts straight to the heart of the matter, differentiating, quite literally, the sheep from the goats. Jesus, the King of Matthew's text, identifies those who inherit *his* kingdom on the basis that they feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, visit the prisoner. Indeed, the values and aspirations of a society built on wealth, privilege and success at the expense of the underprivileged and marginalized, is turned by Jesus completely on its head.

And perhaps the impact of the message is made all the stronger because it is conflated with this secular image of royal thrones and glory. From the position of absolute judgment comes a judgment based on the Christian principles of justice, compassion, kindness and loving care of all, especially those of the "least" of our brothers and sisters. *This is the revelation, the wisdom we seek:*

... that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give *us* a spirit of wisdom and revelation as *we* come to know him, ¹⁸so that, with the eyes of *our* heart enlightened, *we* may know what is the hope to which he has called *us*, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for *we* who believe, according to the working of his great power (after Eph 1:17-19).

+In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.