

CHRIST THE KING 21-11-21 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

2 Samuel 23:1-7; Ps 132:1-12; Revelation 1:4b-8; *John 18:33-37*

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus answered, 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' Pilate replied, 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?' Jesus answered, 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' Pilate asked him, 'So you are a king?' Jesus answered, 'You say that I am a king. 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.'

A question for you: who is the most famous, well-known ancient Roman? Could it be Julius Caesar; Nero; who do you think?

It is probably Pontius Pilate, a fairly unremarkable- if unpleasant- Roman governor of Judea. Every day, all around the world, Christian people say his name whenever we recite the Nicene Creed: "he suffered under Pontius Pilate". People who know nothing about the Roman Empire know the name of this man, whose only claim to distinction is that history remembers that he had Jesus arrested, tortured and executed.

This little passage from John's gospel that presents Pilate having a conversation with Jesus is loaded with sarcasm. We can imagine Pilate looking Jesus up and down, and sneering,

"Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus had been arrested the night before and knocked around a bit, so he probably didn't look very regal. Jesus' response is far from submissive: he said, in effect, "Did you work that out all by yourself or did you have help?" To which Pilate snarled, "What do you think I am, a Jew? Even your own people want me to get rid of you!"

Jesus explained that his kingdom was nothing like the sort of kingdom Pilate was used to and understood. He described a kingdom that has its origins in God, not in this world and its ways. The kingdom Jesus described is all about peace and truth, not power and greed.

The Jewish authorities saw Jesus and his teaching as a threat to their way of being God's chosen people. They played on the Roman practice of swiftly and violently putting down revolt and sedition. If they could successfully present Jesus as the leader of a revolutionary movement promising an alternative government, the Romans would get rid of him quick smart.

Interestingly, if Pilate was convinced that Jesus was a revolutionary leader, he didn't follow up by rounding up and executing his followers. Maybe he did realise that Jesus wasn't that kind of king after all.

For Pilate as for all the people of ancient times, a king needed to be a military leader. Being a king meant fighting battles, and hopefully winning them; expanding your territory and gaining wealth; increasing your power and then fighting to keep it. King David of Israel, who was seen as everything a king should be by the Jewish people, had a lot of blood on his hands. But the kingdom of Israel was at its greatest under his rule, and the people yearned for another king like him ever after. They expected the coming messiah to be another David, one of his descendants and just like his great-great-however many greats- granddad. Jesus kept telling people that he wasn't that sort of king. He embodied the kingship of God. His kingship isn't meek and passive either, it doesn't mean being a doormat; but it isn't about having power over others. His is a subverted image of kingship.

Bill Loader, a wonderful theologian, has said that 'kingship is a broken metaphor which has legitimacy only in its subversion'. The truth is in the contrast, between kingship as it was understood in ancient times, as it is understood today, and as Jesus presents it.

When we say the Lord's Prayer, we pray that God's Kingdom will come on earth. What are we really asking for? Borg and Crossan, another two theologians, have written:

"The kingdom of God that Jesus announced and embodied is what life would be like on Earth, here and now, if God were King and the rulers of this world were not."

What would such a kingdom look like? It's hard for us to imagine a world without war or poverty or greed or disadvantage or racism. The Ruler of this kingdom would not exclude or exploit people, favouring some over others. This kingdom is about caring for the little ones: those who are the least, the last, the lost and the unloved.

Now as far as I can tell, nobody here today is a world leader or a ruler of a country. But who knows what the future may hold for our children, our grandchildren, and our great-grandchildren? The example of leadership that Jesus embodied is one we can all follow.

We can see power for what it really is: something that can so easily be misused. In all our relationships, we can try to be aware of power issues, being careful not to abuse the power we have over others, like our children and loved ones, or those for whom we have responsibility at work.

We can also use our power of choice for the benefit of others. We have power to choose how we spend our money, and how much or little of it we give away. We choose how we use our time, our gifts and abilities. We have been given so much: we have the power to help others out of our comparative riches. Jesus, the King, gave all of himself- knowingly and willingly. He used his power to choose, and he chose truth and love.

We can use our power to choose the way of Jesus, or some other way. Jesus, the king, was not a passive victim: he chose to show the way to God's kingdom, knowing he would probably lose his life.

This story of Jesus and Pilate puts us in mind of Good Friday and Easter: yet today we are celebrating the festival of Christ the King on the last day of the Church's year. Next Sunday is the first in Advent, the first day of the new year. In Advent we look forward to the coming of the Lord, both his incarnation and return. Today is one of those pivotal days, when we look backwards and forwards. We see Jesus, the King who died a criminal's death; and Jesus, the King who was born in the humblest of circumstances.

This is Jesus our King, for whose kingdom we pray. We are citizens of his kingdom, and so we work for peace and justice, truth and generosity. Today we look back and remember even as we look forward into the future. Let's step out in faith and confidence, and always with hope.

The Lord be with you.