

Sermon Feast of Christ the King 2022

This past year – perhaps more than usual for us here in the antipodes – images and ideas of kings and kingdoms, of monarchies, realms and dominions have been on glorious show. With the Platinum Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth just this past February, and then her death, the proclamation of the new king, and the queen’s funeral in September, so many of those ideas and images were brought to full display. We come today to crown the church’s liturgical year with this feast of Christ the King. And we might be tempted to think that there is a natural and easy correlation between what we saw displayed on our TVs and computers and newspapers unfolding in Britain earlier in the year, and our concepts of Christ as King. And while there are points of connection, the correlations are actually pretty thin. The imagery of Christ the King reflects a profound theological truth: that Christ indeed is sovereign and Lord of All. But trying to understand *what* that actually means requires that the language and imagery we use to convey this truth in fact have to be recast, reimagined. Just transferring our secular, worldly understanding of kings and kingdoms onto Christ just doesn’t work.

The scripture readings placed before us today help us in some of that task of recasting and reimagining the language of kings, kingdom and kingship. Saint Paul in the epistle portion to the Colossians today reminds us of the universal scope of Christ’s lordship. *All Thrones, Dominations, Sovereignities and Powers ... were created through him and for him.* Christ is not just Lord of Christians. He is not just Lord of the church. He is Lord of the entire universe! *All things are subject to him.* So often we try to limit and constrict the work of Christ. Today’s feast reminds us that the scope of his saving work is boundless.

Perhaps most importantly, today as we consider the universal lordship of Christ our King, we are directed toward the Cross. The gospel today affirms that, yes, Jesus is king. The title board pinned to the Cross says as much. But look exactly at what kind of king is shown there. A king who reigns from the cross. A king whose throne is the Cross. A king whose crown is made of thorns. A king whose exercise of power is one of powerlessness. A king whose glory is one of shame. The exercise of Christ’s kingship could hardly be more different – *more strange* - to the ideas and imagery we normally associate with kings and kingship.

But this *strangeness* is precisely where Christian truth is most likely to be found. Several Christian writers and commentators are starting to say that for the church in our context to be effective in its evangelism then it must learn to be strange again.

For the church to be authentic to its vocation and mission, it must become strange again. If we wish to find a way to have our heard voice above the noise, confusion and distraction of our world, then we must learn to be strange again. Our worship, our language, our conduct, our ethics and values are all meant to be strange. Our interaction with the world - strange.

Making the faith strange again means we look no further than the strangest thing of all: the Cross! The Cross which reveals at once both the One whom we seek to follow, and also the cost of following him.

One of my favourite quotes from the ancient world comes from Pliny, Roman governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor. In one of his letters to the Roman Emperor Trajan he asked how to deal with the early Christian community. He was no friend of the church. Pliny stated that he gave Christians multiple chances to affirm they were innocent and if they refused three times, they were executed. The crime, it would seem, was the stubborn refusal of Christians to worship Roman gods, making them appear as objecting to Roman rule. Pliny wrote his letter around the year 112 AD, so when the ink of parts of the New Testament was barely dry.

He wrote, They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food – but food of an ordinary and innocent kind. Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life.

Their teaching is not based upon reveries inspired by the curiosity of men. Unlike some other people, they champion no purely human doctrine. With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign. And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labor under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them. They share their meals, but not their wives.

This is an account of an outsider looking in. And importantly noticing something peculiar. Something different. Something strangely attractive. *Something strange*. I wonder what an Australian diplomat at the end of this century might write, to say, a new President of China. Might an outsider then look at us and say, *These Christians are peculiar and strange but they show love and charity to all. They work and play amongst regular citizens. But they set careful limits. They refuse to work on Sundays, and some jobs are judged inappropriate. They do not see promotion, success and material wealth as the highest good. They value marriage not simply as a romantic union to be disposed of when wearied, but as a sacred lifelong covenant.*

They celebrate the birth of children who are regarded as neither environmental nor economic burden. They humbly accept the biological sex of their children and refuse to have them mutilated. They are cautious about the intrusion of technology on their bodies. They neither abort their unborn nor euthanize their old. When all about them have become lost to addiction, self-indulgence, violence and despair, the Christians have become oases of virtue, self-control, generosity, and peace. When all about them see only darkness, they have become beacons of life and hope. Could this be said of us?

If we speak about Christ as our king, then we must also consider what it means to be his subject, and a citizen of his kingdom. In this kingdom we are strange! If the Christian life is indistinguishable from our neighbours and work colleagues; if there are no particular Christian beliefs that inform our decision when we go to the polls next week (and how difficult that choice will be, now that all leaders of all the major parties in this state are now anti-life and anti-family!); if our daily conduct, our values do not appear strange to those about us, then we are not yet full citizens of Christ's kingdom! The Cross reminds us how strange Christ's rule is, and the cost of being his subject. There has never been a Christian utopia in which it cost nothing to be a faithful follower of Jesus. It has always been costly to follow him; to show true allegiance to him. Time and place only differ in where the lines are drawn. Where those lines are drawn in our day and age is very clear.

The strangeness of Christian allegiance is made manifest for us in today's celebration. After Communion, we will take the Blessed Sacrament and circle our church. It is a strange thing to do. But we do not do this simply for strangeness' sake. We are not advocating weirdness as 'an expression of our identity', in the language so favoured of today. No. We go out, we process, we follow the Blessed Sacrament - Christ truly present among us - because it reflects a profound theological truth: *we follow him*. He leads the way. And however strange it makes us, our allegiance is to him. Amen.