

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 24th November 2024, Christ the King

Readings: **2Samuel 23:1-7**
Revelation 1:4b-8

Psalm 132:1-12
John 18:33-37

In January this year I visited Bogota, in South America. Bogota is the Capital of Colombia and has a population of just over eleven and a half million people, which feels a little hectic when you're walking around the markets! I particularly enjoyed the vibrancy of the graffiti, the music of the buskers, and the Spanish Colonial architecture.

If possible when travelling I go to church but there is no Anglican Church in Colombia. The great majority of the population are Roman Catholic so I found a mid-week service on the website of the principal Cathedral and arrived in good time. I sat at the back to listen and see how much I could follow with the little Spanish I understood. Interestingly the shape of the service was very familiar for we sang, we prayed, we said sorry to God in the words of a confession, we listened to Bible readings and they were familiar... One reading I had preached on several times and I was intrigued to hear how the priest unpacked the text.

That priest, seeing that I was clearly engaged, came all the way to the back of the Cathedral and beckoned me to follow him to the front to join the small congregation of about seventy people who all smiled and made me welcome. He insisted that I have communion, and I left greatly encouraged that I belonged to a Christian community of faith that used many languages to sing and pray, teach and care.

One prayer I knew in Spanish was the Lord's Prayer and it was a moving thing to pray this together with the congregation in Bogota. Of course, in that prayer we pray, 'Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven...' '*...venga tu reino, hagase tu voluntad, en la tierra como en el cielo.*' And we pray, 'For yours is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, now and forever. Amen' '*Porque tuyo es el reino, tuyo es el poder y tuya es la gloria, ahora y por siempre. Amen*'

Many of us would pray the words of this prayer each day: 'Your Kingdom come....' and, 'Yours is the Kingdom...' and I wonder what we mean when we say 'kingdom'? The wonderful dialogue between Pilate and Jesus in today's Gospel reading gives us opportunity to consider this.

We have great hymns that speak of Christ as king, and one we will sing this Christmas affirms, "*Joy to the world! The Lord is come; let earth receive her **king**; let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing...*" And, in the last verse, "*He **rules** the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove, the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his love...*"

Yet, the language of kingship has political implications because kings claim geographical territory, and the resources within it. They have armies to defend and expand this territory, and the people within it are theirs to govern. They have financial resources and often there is a currency which has their name, or image upon it. If a king, or queen, rules over a number of kingdoms, we might call that territory an Empire, and it is helpful to bear in mind that Jesus lived in a small territory within the Roman Empire.

So, when Pilate asked Jesus, *“Are you the King of the Jews?”* he was really asking, ‘Are you a rebel king?’ Jesus seemed to intuit that Pilate did not believe the accusation because he replied, *“Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?”* (John 18:34)

Jesus knew he’d been set up, and Pilate knew this, but Pilate did not have the courage to call it for what it was. In some ways it would seem that a compromised religious leadership did a deal with a compromised political leadership and an innocent man was executed... Not for the first time, and not for the last.

It is helpful to consider the dialogue between Pilate and Jesus in this Gospel. For, Jesus is remembered saying, *“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...”* (John 18:36)

For three years Jesus had been teaching that God desired human beings to practice love and justice in their living, and that God’s Spirit was given to bring healing and freedom. Jesus didn’t just say provocative things, he allowed them to guide and govern the way he lived his life. He didn’t court the powerful, or compromise on core beliefs – but instead went to some of the most despised people in his society and, through this, changed their lives. Tax collectors were spat upon as collaborators, but Jesus shared meals with them and invited them to be part of his team. Lepers were deemed to be judged by God and were excluded from family and community, but Jesus listened to them, touched them, and brought healing.

Time, and again the response of Jesus to people around him seems to have been characterised by compassion. For instead of affirming the teaching that justified revenge – with *an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth* – he affirmed that we need to forgive our enemies and pray for those who persecute us! Tough teaching... which the majority of us struggle with.

A less triumphal hymn which seeks to describe the nature of Christ was written by the English hymn writer, Graham Kendrick. He called Jesus the ‘Servant King’ in a song of the same name. The chorus affirms: *“This is our God, the servant king, he calls us now to follow him, to bring our lives as a daily offering, of worship to the servant king...”* And, in the last

verse, “...let us learn how to serve, and in our lives enthrone him, each other’s needs to prefer – for it is Christ we’re serving...”

That last verse is deeply grounded in teaching found in the twenty fifth chapter of Matthew, which remembers Jesus suggesting we will all be held accountable by God at some stage in the future. But, accountable for the ways we have responded to human need – not for the church we attended, the Creed we affirmed, or the prayers we offered! How do we as individuals, as congregations, as a community, and as society - feed the hungry; give water to the thirsty; clothe the naked; care for the sick; visit those who are imprisoned; and welcome the stranger?

What kind of Kingdom was Jesus on about, and what kind of King do we imagine him to be when we name him ‘Lord’ in prayer and song? My hunch is that an important element in the Kingdom of God is that everybody matters! Everybody matters... regardless of Creed, nationality, language, or gender. And in that ‘kingdom’ the leader will welcome those who are unsure if they should be there and, even wash their feet; heal those who are sick; free those who are bound... and seek out those who are lost.

I think an extraordinary aspect of our faith is that Christ not only welcomes, loves, and takes care of us... he invites us to work with him so that others can be drawn into a life shaped by love and hope in Christ. We remember Jesus teaching us to pray through the ages, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven...” “...venga tu reino, hagase tu voluntad, en la tierra come en el cielo.”

In God’s grace, may this be so in my life and yours.

Gracious God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives, and the gift of your love. Through your Spirit, give us wisdom and the desire to live in ways that will bring blessing to the world in which we live. We ask in the name of Jesus Christ, who shows us the way. Amen