

Proper 29 (Reign of Christ)

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Introduction

At the heart of this dramatic narrative is the debate over the question of Kingship, who has ultimate authority; who has the right to rule. In this subject state of the Roman Empire, Tiberius Caesar is the supreme ruler and Pilate his representative. To question the authority of Caesar is an act of treason, punishable by death.

In the end Jesus' response to the charge that he is claiming Kingship, is that God's reign is the ultimate truth and authority for this world.

Do you find it difficult to accept that God's will, will be done on earth as it is in heaven?

Text

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.'

Comment

Conflict and Power

In John's narrative this contest over Kingship began when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. This miracle caused such a stir bringing the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities to a head. So when Jesus, knowing what was coming, chose to enter Jerusalem riding on an ass, a sign of peace, the huge crowd who were in Jerusalem for the Passover, took this as yet another messianic sign. They shouted "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel"

However, Jesus' liberating, restorative and life-giving power demonstrated in the raising of Lazarus and now celebrated by the crowd was seen by the religious rulers as a dangerous challenge to their power and position. They wished to dispense of Jesus once and for all. But only the Roman state could deliver capital punishment. Religious authorities arrest Jesus and bring him before Pilate. Here we have a battle of multiple power blocks; the religious leaders, the crowd, Pilate, Caesar and of course the alleged kingship of Jesus.

So Pilate asks Jesus, Are you King of the Jews? The conflict raises issues of loyalty, rightful authority and personal prestige. As ever in conflict, the power dynamic is central.

The recent UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow also displayed complex clash of power blocks. The nations were limited in what they could achieve by the need to reach consensus when each represented very diverse needs and political contexts. The protesters outside were motivated by common issue of the climate crisis facing the planet. They had a very different perspective and a focused objective.

There was a complex array of power blocks at the trial of Jesus. As Pilate shuttles between the crowd outside his headquarters and his meeting face to face with Jesus inside. He clearly wishes the whole thing would go away and that the local authorities would deal with Jesus according to their own rules. It was then that the religious leaders played their trump card and demanded that Jesus be put to death. If Jesus claimed to be King, Pilate would have reason to execute Jesus. If this were so, Pilate had a solution to his dilemma, he could please the crowd and also discharge his duties to the Emperor. So a lot hung on Jesus answer to Pilate's question, "Are you King of the Jews?"

My Kingdom is not from this world

Jesus answers "My kingdom is not from this world"

This phrase has been used by some Christians as a reason to withdraw from the world. This wasn't helped by the King James translation "My kingdom is not of this world". I have known church congregations refusing to allow their young people play table tennis on church property as it was considered "worldly". Churches have also used these words of Jesus to excuse their indifference to injustice, poverty, and all manner of local community and global concerns as they have nothing to do with the Church because their concern is spiritual not "worldly". This dualism is a complete misrepresentation of the incarnation, who Jesus is, and what Jesus said. Jesus was saying the rules dictated by the authorities and powers (Ephesians 6.12 what Walter Wink described as the worlds 'domination systems' see below) were not what he followed. The reality, the truth he testified to was the character of God's Reign, demonstrated in the outworking of Love, Mercy, Justice, Mercy and Peace (Psalm 85 v 10) This was the heart of Jesus mission "for this I came into the

world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”

I can think of no clearer mandate for the Church to give high priority to its commitment to addressing so called secular concerns of our troubled world

I came into the world, to testify to the truth.

The principles we are committed to, and the values we live by are a large component in any conflict. In a local dispute over environmental issues, A multi-national company with a stated commitment to maximising profits and dividends to their share holders will have a very different perspective than a group of eco activists from the local area. If you like they are following different rules, they have different priorities and they want different outcomes. In a world committed to financial growth, every increasing consumption where the earths resources are seen solely as a source of wealth, where human labour is recruited for the least possible cost, there will be conflict with such a company and anyone who seeks to live a life of loving concern for others and well-being our planet.

Its not often that I hear from someone who lives in the Amazonian Rain Forest. Txai Surui is twenty four and was in Glasgow for COP26. Her people have lived in the Amazon forest for 6000 years. I think our life is better than here she said. It is quiet. We have time to think. We live with the animals, the birds, the rivers and the trees. We are part of nature not just living here. But the animals are disappearing, the rivers are dying, and our plants don't flower. “The earth is telling us we have no more time.” She said.

Since she spoke at COP26 Txai has received a flood of death threats.

So Jesus was living the “truth” of a Kingdom at variance with the world of his day (and our day!) The world of empire is characterised domination, exploitation and violence, a far cry from the Kingdom of God.

As followers of Jesus to live in response to the values of God's Kingdom is to follow the path of abundant life where peace is the alternative to violence, where inclusion is the alternative to the emergence of elites, where the sharing of goods is the alternative to amassing of wealth where a God of the powerless is the alternative to a God who sanctions inequalities.

Religion always faces the temptation to enhance its influence by siding with worldly power, and has done so, sometimes even justifying violence and oppression in the name of the said religion. But Jesus in todays Gospel would rebuke such a notion, saying My Kingdom is not from this world. Jesus power is very different. It is the power of Love. Loving God and loving our neighbour as ourselves is the key to abundant living in God's world. Those who follow Jesus give witness to this truth.

The Christian belief that generates hope, is the conviction that God's reign is the truth about this world and what our life is about.

Can you think of examples in the past when the Church has opted to side with worldly power?

Is there a danger that we as followers of Jesus, are doing so today?

What are the opportunities in your local context to give witness to the truth of God's reign?

Prayer

God of Mercy, Justice, Peace and Love

We praise you for making yourself known in Jesus Christ.

In the babble of voices seeking our attention and claiming our allegiance

Assist us to hear your still small voice

Prompting us to witness to Your Reign of love

In your name we pray

Amen.

Further Reading

Walter Wink. *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in A World of Domination*. (Fortress Press)