

Sermon preached, 22nd November 2015, in St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney, by Rev Ross Smith. Lectionary: 2 Samuel 23:1-7; Psalm 132:1-12, (13-18); Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37.

Hail! King!

Today, everything is political! Jesus' trial is political, engineered by the government of his day, the Jewish leadership, acting as puppet of Roman overlord. The outcome was known before the trial began, to be crucifixion, the punishment meted out to traitors, terrorists, whistle-blowers and revolutionaries. The authorities regarded Jesus as all of these.

He overturned the bankers' tables in the temple, He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, mocking the kingly parade of a mounted Caesar. He sharply critiqued priest and lawyer, and likened them to robbers of widows and destroyers of the dignity of the common people, called "sinners."

Today's scripture, from John, as we finish the church's Year B, speaks of the kingship of God, the reign of Christ. Readings mainly came from Mark, supplemented by John. The feast of "Christ the King," created by Pope Pius XI in 1925, celebrates the reign of Christ in the modern world.

It was instituted in a time of utter chaos in European countries. The disaster of the First World War was followed by the disastrous "peace settlement," which laid seeds for the Second World War in the impoverishment and humiliation of the German people and their allies. Colonialism was at its worst, the search for oil and minerals by big corporations carved up Middle-Eastern countries, and dangerous forces were about to hatch in the thirties.

A different way than brute force and corruption of power at highest levels, a different image of leadership, was needed. The Papal proclamation said that Jesus Christ is King, "the goal of human history, the joy of hearts, and fulfilment of all aspirations...drawn together in this Spirit we press onward toward the consummation of history which fully corresponds to the plan of his love: 'to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth'" (Eph: 1:10). (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern World* #45 p.947, Flannery.)

You and I, and the worldwide church, have journeyed through the gospels of Mark and John and come to this culmination of the Church's year. Next week is a new Church Year with Luke's gospel: Advent season, to be followed by Christmas and New Year and through to another celebration of Christ the King next November.

We have journeyed through huge amounts of turmoil in our nation and in our world. Political, with changes in party leadership and the whole tenor of debate; economic, with record-making low interest rates and problems in the mining resources sector in sustainability and environmental impacts; in the cultural arena, with religions having internecine strife in the Middle East and North Africa, and commissions investigating sexual misconduct in church and other institutions.

This turmoil is accompanied by a spread of guerilla warfare, nowadays called "terrorism." The people who engage in terrorism say that others are waging terror against them, with large-scale air strikes and drone attacks. They feel justified in striking back at those they regard as oppressors.

In recent weeks, media agencies have given copious coverage to barbaric attacks on civilians in the streets of Paris, Beirut, Mali and the Russian plane brought down in the Sinai desert. Leaders gathering in Europe continue to discuss how to move forward in the Middle East and North Africa, how to deal with increasing numbers of asylum seekers fleeing horrendous conflict.

In the midst of all this trouble and strife, many today are looking for a leader, a Messiah or King who would provide a way to solve the myriad problems besetting the modern world. In this context, the church has set its model of the kingly one. The kingly one is Jesus, who has stood before the church council, puppets of the Romans, the occupation forces of his day. Then they sent him on, as an alleged criminal, a "terrorist and whistle-blower," to the political leader of his nation.

There he is asked “Are you the King (the Messiah) of the Jews?”

What a spectacle is paraded before Pilate. A ridiculed man, standing before the head of the occupation forces, beaten and bloodied, with a crown of thorns on his head. “You've got to be joking,” Pilate must have thought. “Are you King?” “Are you a messianic terrorist?”

There is no doubt that this was the crime for which Jesus was to be crucified, for this was the charge written on the cross “This is the King of the Jews” “See what happens to Messianic Pretenders, to whistle-blowers, to terrorists,” is the unwritten sub-text.

The scene with Pilate and the Messianic Pretender reminds us of some of our political leaders. Pilate is weak, indecisive. Got his hands more than full trying to keep some order amongst the troublesome colonials. Jesus seems to be assured and in control.

As the interrogation goes on, we find Jesus is putting questions back to the one who thinks he is the judge, the one in control. “Are you speaking your own mind or merely mouthing what you have been told about me?” Pilate is nettled by this response, saying “I'm no Jew! It's your own people, your own leaders, who have handed you over to me.

Jesus does not deny that he is King (Messiah). He affirms that “My kingship is not of your world.” And so Pilate says “So you really are king.” Jesus turns this back to Pilate, saying, “You are the one who keeps saying that I am king.”

Jesus affirms that his sole purpose in life was to tell about the truth. Truth here means not a set of propositions, but reality, the way it is. In terms of John's Gospel, Jesus' mission is to bring abundant life, a life lived in a real world. A different world from that of the Roman. That is why Jesus says: “My kingship is not of your world.” Not the world of political manipulation, of brute force.

Those who lead us, perhaps, have a tinge of Messianic aspiration, but we are not surprised to find that they are ordinary beings who are very like ourselves and who often think that they have the solutions to our human problems, to make our world secure, safe and progressive. Like Pilate, like you and me, they are sometimes inept, struggling with marriage and children and work pressures.

Struggling with reality. We are not shocked, either, to find that Jesus has managed to put the whole Roman world on trial, at his trial. And you and I, and the political, economic and cultural world, is also on trial. And ever will be, as we all face the way life is.

For the question posed by Jesus is about the kind of reality we acknowledge, the way we believe life really is, what we are prepared to live and die for. Compassion and caring were not features of the Roman corporate world or of our times. Corporations dodge tax. They avoid contributing to their own or any country's economies. They mouth their intention to be ethical, honest and transparent, but are rightly ridiculed when their practices are exposed by whistle-blowers.

Jesus' choice, to not exercise power over people, challenges those who seek to impose their power over others. His willingness to show compassion, to give of himself, rather than to take from others – these as modelled by Jesus were deeply offensive to the powers-that-be of his day.

Jesus' choices challenged the status quo of his day. They challenge the status quo of our time. It is different from treating people as doormats, different from robbing poor to benefit rich, different from subjugating groups or countries to benefit stockholders of oil or mining corporations.

The suffering servant is a king who brings the affirmative word that creates a new world, a new vision, a new life and brings light where darkness once ruled. *John 1:4b* says: “His life gave light to everyone.” *Revelation 1:5* says: “May kindness and peace be yours from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness.” We say, “Hail, Light Bringer! Hail, Faithful Witness! Hail, King Jesus!”