

The Reign of Christ

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 23 November 2014, by David Gill. Readings for the Reign of Christ were Ezekiel 34:11-16,20-24, Ephesians 1:15-23 and St Matthew 25:31-46

Today we come to the last Sunday of the Church's year.

Through the past 52 weeks we have travelled a very long way. From the ancient yearnings of Advent to the astonishing claims of Christmas, the dramatic discoveries of Epiphany, the self-searching of Lent, the grim realism of Holy Week, the explosive Joy of Easter, the new life of Pentecost. So many stories, so many teachings. So many questions, so much wondering.

Today it all comes together. Today we affirm the significance of the man at the centre of that saga. Today we celebrate him as sovereign Lord of all. As Christ the King.

It is not an empty title, a relic of centuries past. It has far-reaching implications for today. It turns followers of the man of the cross into potential subversives. At least, it may, for such people march to the beat of a drum the world cannot hear.

Ten years ago, on this Sunday marking the authority of Christ, I preached on the perils of patriotism. In Hong Kong, China.

What sparked that sermon was a comment from a highly placed Chinese official, who had warned that only "true patriots" should be considered eligible for political office in Hong Kong. Everyone knew the code. By patriots, he meant rock-solid supporters of party policy, those who could be counted on to fall in line with the national government in Beijing.

By chance, our service that Sunday was broadcast on radio. I wondered whether the sermon would earn me a rebuke from the authorities. Two decades earlier, a British governor had banned the pastor of Kowloon Union Church from the airwaves after my predecessor, in a broadcast, dared to criticise the colonial government. What would happen to me?

Nothing happened to me. Nothing. For preachers, it seemed, life under Beijing was easier than it had been under London. That is still the case, although whether it will continue is now a question. During Hong Kong's recent turmoil, voices have been heard again trying to use patriotism as a weapon to silence dissent, and there have been muted warnings to the churches.

Not that patriotism is all bad. It can be a wonderful thing.

Years ago, at Sydney University, one of my friends hailed from Indonesia. He had done well in his engineering course, with the chance to go on to a higher degree. No, he said, I cannot. Why not, I asked. You would love to tackle postgraduate work. No, he said again, I must go back to Indonesia. Why? "Because my country needs engineers, and it needs them now."

"My people need me. They have an important claim on my life." If that's patriotism, I'm all for it. We can all drink to it. It's a spirit we should all admire.

But the fact remains that patriotism can be dangerous, very dangerous indeed.

For one thing, the word is vague in its meaning and powerful in its emotive consequences. Toss the rhetoric of patriotism around irresponsibly and you can do an awful lot of damage. Waving a flag can have a whole nation rushing into the killing fields.

Through the centuries we have seen how easy it is to be conned when governments play the patriot card, when media voices pump up aggressive nationalism, when people's capacity to think about world affairs is dumbed down and the jingoism of the crowd takes over.

"My country, right or wrong!" we cry – only to discover later, all too often, that my country was very wrong indeed and we failed to see it.

Not only is the notion of patriotism notoriously slippery. Not only has it been dreadfully misused by the powerful. There is also a fundamental problem with it, at least there ought to be, for those of us who profess the Christian faith.

We try to be good citizens. But faith in Christ entails recognising a loyalty transcending our cultures and ethnic groups, an authority more binding than that of governments, a power beyond that of the state.

Some years ago, one of our local radio shock jocks was working himself into a lather over the possibility that Muslims in this country might have a religious loyalty transcending their loyalty to Australia. Of course, they do. The speaker seemed blissfully unaware that – shock, horror -- Christians do too. That tends to happen when you believe in God!

The cross that stands above and within our churches, the cross with which we are signed in baptism, is a symbol more potent, for us, than any flag.

Two weeks ago, Germans were marking the 25th anniversary of the collapse of the infamous wall that once divided Berlin. I have spoken before about the pastoral team from the World Council of Churches that crossed through that wall in 1979. We spent three weeks with local congregations across what was then the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). The communist government was still firmly in power. Christians in the east felt isolated. They welcomed our presence as a way of communicating with their brothers and sisters elsewhere.

At one point, visiting the industrial city of Leuna, I asked congregation whether they had any message they wanted me to take back to Geneva. “Yes,” said a voice in the crowd. “Please tell our friends in the World Council of Churches that we have learned that Christus ist Herren – that Christ is Lord”.

I was about to dismiss that as an easy bit of piety, the sort of thing you expect to hear in churches. Then I looked again at who was saying it. She was old. Her face was lined. She must have been born back in the years of the Kaiser. She had seen her country defeated in the First World War. She’d seen the rise and fall of the Weimar Republic, the emergence of Hitler, the persecution of the Jews, the defeat and devastation of her country in the Second World War. She’d lived for thirty years under a not-always-very-benign communist government. Centuries of human experience, concentrated into a single human life. And out of it all, she was able to say in ringing tones and with a look in her eye that defied contradiction: “We have learned that Christ is Lord”.

“Christ is Lord”. This day, her conviction is being affirmed in churches across the world. Christ reigns. Christ is King.

But ... what kind of king? Here things get complicated. We’re talking about a man who was born in poverty, who was an asylum seeker in infancy, who was condemned as a subversive, ridiculed as a fool, executed as a criminal, accompanied in death by two thieves. A strange kind of king indeed. A *different* kind of king, for sure.

Jesus of Nazareth was not leading an armed insurrection. He was not competing directly with the power brokers of his time. Yet he was not crucified for uttering pious platitudes. Clearly there was something about him that shook the existing order to its foundations. The divine love he embodied challenged the status quo of his day. The cross on which he died, the cross at the centre of this church, still challenges the status quo of ours.

That cross speaks still of a love which is for all. As his compassion reached out to the penitent thief, so it reaches out still – to you, to me, to all the people of this city. Still it breaks down the walls people build to insulate themselves from each other, to exercise power over each other, to excuse themselves from caring about each other. Still it stands in judgement over the identities – of race, gender, culture, even religion – to which we give our loyalty and which all too often we treat as gods.

Christ the compassionate King gives himself in love for others, *all* others, whether they know it or not, whether they care about it or not, whether they respond to it or not. Today's gospel, using the dramatic language of final judgement, makes the consequence for us unmistakably clear. We who acknowledge the reign of Christ are required to do the same – give ourselves in costly love for others. In the world at large and right here, in the city of Sydney.

Maybe, after all, there is a place for patriotism – my Indonesian friend's kind of patriotism. Not the kind that blusters against others, that rants about "my country, right or wrong," that becomes the unthinking agent of aggressive nationalism, that uses slogans of loyalty as political weapons to exclude. But the kind that says yes I do owe something to the human family, yes my following of Christ does need to be grounded in the community where I live and work, yes I do want to be a good steward of the skills God has given me and put them to the service of those around me.

Christ is King. Not a ruler who treats people as doormats. But a servant leader, who invites us all to sign up for his revolution of limitless love and amazing grace.

In that revolution, there is a place for each one of us.

Let us be patriots, of that kind, together, in the service of Christ our King.

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