

SERMON

Luke 23:33-43

Christ is King

Nunawading and Waverley,

20-11-22

Dear friends in Christ, We have a king, King Charles. Oh dear! King Albanese; double oh dear! You can see the problem immediately; they seem to promise much but deliver little. And in the end, every earthly leader has feet of clay, some weakness or corruption that leads to poor or ineffectual leadership.

Jesus was born under Caesar Augustus and died under Caesar Tiberius. Tiberius started as a brilliant general but became increasingly suspicious and descended into paranoia. Insanity took hold and he became dark and cruel and did nothing to restrain his adopted son Caligula, who went on to become a vicious and depraved emperor. We celebrate Jesus as the king of the universe, whom we confess will return in glory, as he himself promised. Now, it is a peculiar thing that our Lord Jesus did not proclaim himself the king.

He could not deny it when on trial and an answer demanded of him; Pilate said, so you are a king! When others worshipped him as the Messiah, the king of the universe, he accepted such praise. On his way to Jerusalem, the crowd of disciples shouted: Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. But he never sought a position and title. We can see how different Jesus was from all other leaders because he wasn't after power and wealth. Satan said he could have all the kingdoms of the world but he would have none of it.

Such was his self-denial and service to you and me that Governor Pontius Pilate could write an inscription full of irony and place it on the cross above his head: Jesus, king of the Jews. Here is your king, a crucified man deserted even by his followers yet we would say, giving himself up for the world. Now, here is something really interesting. Whilst not going about claiming a position and title, he did proclaim the coming of his kingdom.

The word kingdom appears much more often in the gospels. Why? Because his purpose was to include us in his kingdom, to bring every human being who would trust him into the kingdom of his love, compassion and redemption. It is in proclaiming his kingdom that he shines forth as King, the King of kings and Lord of lords. In his lowest moment, when nailed to the wood of cross and slowly suffocating and dying under torture, he thought of the thief dying next to him.

Here was a criminal who robbed and hurt many people. He violated their homes and businesses but came to repentance on the cross and said: remember me when you come into your kingdom.

And Jesus' reply: Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise. We know the secret, then, that this king is known by his humility and his love. He was willing to give up the position alongside his Father and the Holy Spirit. His humility and his love led him to be poor, human, weak in body, suffer for others, even die, taking the punishment of sins into himself, being judged, feeling all the troubles of humanity and then ending them through his cross and resurrection. No human being can do these things because only God can strip himself naked and be the bearer of human loneliness, arrogance, greed, aggression and hopelessness. In his preaching on earth, we hear how unusual it was in the way he re-organised human existence is. He preached that the poor and the persecuted are the blessed and that the kingdom of God is theirs.

In contrast, he does not bestow his kingdom on the rich, the well fed, those laughing and partying. When the disciples wanted to have control over others' lives, he said that the rulers of the world do that but that they have to put themselves last and be the servants of all. When the women brought their babies to him to be blessed, he told the adults that the kingdom belongs to such as these and that they had to become babies in order to enter it.

Everything in this kingdom was upside down. Instead of coercing people to believe and being strict with them, regulating their lives as the priests and legal experts were doing, he said that his kingdom was a mystery, that it grew unseen like yeast in a loaf or a mustard seed planted in a garden. The kingdom lay hidden beneath things, like treasure in a field.

Then he said something his followers had no idea about: he told them the kingdom of God was unseen, within them. A lot of scratching of heads over that one. When Jesus noticed that the disciples were fearful of the sacrifices of discipleship, he turned to them and said, do not fear little flock.

It is my Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Extraordinarily, Jesus made his kingdom a gift to his children, by grace and through faith in him. I hope that what I have said will lead to total trust in him as your King. He has brought you into his kingdom and indeed, established his kingdom in our hearts. It is time now to let him be king over your bodies, over your time, over your money, over your recreation, over your entire selves, which should be offered to him.