

Christ the King

Sermon at St Saviour's Cathedral, Goulburn, 21 November 2011

Jeremiah 23: 1–6; Benedictus; Colossians 1: 11–20; Luke 23:
33–43 (Year 'C')

Canon Scott Cowdell

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit.

AMEN.

This last Sunday of the Church's annual calendar is devoted to Christ the King, and just when we might think that ideas of kingship are impossibly old-fashioned and irrelevant to our lives today, the media and the internet are full of news about a royal wedding. Prince William and Kate Middleton are to marry—King William V and Queen Catherine in waiting. The issue of kings and queens is much debated in Australia: are we better off with the constitutional monarchy, with sovereignty vested in the King or Queen and parliament, as it were, or are the republicans right, that sovereignty properly belongs to the people? Which model is better at doing what sovereignty is meant to do: ensuring justice, maintaining law and order, creating the opportunity for peace and prosperity? Some say that monarchy and the social hierarchy it presupposes keeps us respectful, which makes for a more just and peaceful society. Others say that equality before the law isn't enough, and that a republican model ensures true equality. Of course, the world's oldest stable republic, the American one, with its strange mix of equality and inequality, with its culture of envy, rivalry and extraordinary levels of violence, might make us wonder whether vesting sovereignty in the people alone really does make for a more rather than less just and peaceful society. Whichever way we ultimately go, the fact of sovereignty, the

power of the state, its legal claim over the individual, the rule of law, the right of the state to use force, through the armed forces and through the police, all remind us that we humans need looking after, and protecting from ourselves. The Christian tradition, following on from Israel's story in the Old Testament, believes that stability and order in society is something God invests in, that God blesses lawful sovereignty in the nations of our world, for the sake of human well-being. In other words, the state, the king, or the president, the parliament and the law courts, the military and the police, are all signs of God's tough love.

But the clue to really understanding this is to realise that God is in charge, with the nations and whoever their national sovereignty is vested in declared to be God's servants, for the sake of our human family which God loves and cares for. British sovereigns are crowned by the Church for this reason, and parliamentary sessions commence with prayer. Like it or not in our secular and multi-faith society, these traditions are a reminder that the nation's claims are not absolute, that its sovereign authority is limited, that the King is God's servant. Our first reading today, from the prophet Jeremiah, makes this very clear, declaring God's disappointment over bad and corrupt leaders in the nation, who have failed to shepherd God's people justly. Instead of a psalm today we had the Benedictus, the song of Zechariah anticipating the birth of John the Baptist, and a new day when God would renew the Kingship in Israel, when God would bring a new shepherd to God's people, of whom John the Baptist would be witness. Here the prayer of Israel for a good King, like King David in the old days, expresses a deeper longing: not just for order and stability in society, but for a new future in

which the deep unfulfilled longings of human hearts would be fulfilled. And this is precisely what God gives us, in the one whom John the Baptist proclaims, Jesus Christ.

In Jesus, we get the promised King, but not as many expected. Those who dreamed of kicking the Romans out and Israel becoming a great nation again were to be disappointed. Jesus was not that sort of King. And those who look to the Church as a safe and non-threatening organ of society are going to be disappointed, too: those who look to us for respectability, prudential morality, and conventional values—the kinds of things many people say they're seeking when they bring their children for baptism, for instance, or when they seek a Church wedding. I'm afraid Jesus is always likely to disappoint these people, because he isn't respectable, because he doesn't fit in with normal priorities and conventional wisdom, because he demonstrates that preserving the status quo can never be the whole story with God. In other words, in Jesus Christ, God shows his more adventurous side. In Jesus Christ, God takes off humanity's trainer wheels, calling us to adventures with God beyond social stability, beyond the conventional values which of course matter to God but which can never be the whole story. Christ the King is a different sort of King. And today's Gospel shows just how different he is.

Christ the King appears in today's Gospel as a condemned criminal and the friend of condemned criminals. No respectable position in society here, to which our Anglican Church used to be so wedded in Australia—with our white gloves in church and nice cups of tea with nice people after and all very proper. In jarring contrast to all this, Jesus is condemned to death as a rebel by the

Roman Empire. Why? Because he dared to remind Rome who the real God was—that Caesar had overstepped himself, like sovereign authorities before and since have overstepped themselves, building peace and stability ultimately at the cost of much injustice, violence and suffering. Jesus forgives those who crucify him in today's gospel—but in doing so, of course, he declares the sovereign authority which condemned him to be in the wrong, and denies that it has any proper power over him. He judges it, not the other way around—though on this occasion he chooses to forgive. And as for the criminal alongside him with enough wit to shake off the mob mentality and see Jesus for who he really is, the death sentence of Rome is effectively set aside: 'today you will be with me in Paradise'.

In our Epistle reading from Colossians, the extent of Jesus' differentness is explained. This crucified one whose death everyone agreed on—except the thief on the cross, that is—reveals how things really are with God. In Jesus crucified we see God's patient, self-involving struggle to change things in our world, with injustice and cruelty shown up and disempowered, with deviated power structures called back to a proper attitude of reserve and of service to others—forgiving our sins, like he forgave the thief on the cross; rescuing us from the darkness of business as usual in human history to discover something new. We hear in this Colossians passage that Jesus Christ is our clue to understanding the whole creation, so that all the powers of this world—thrones, dominions, principalities—find their proper level only with reference to who he was and what he did. All things ultimately hold together in him—in his sacrificial love and mercy revealing what God is persistently up to in our world. This is in stark contrast with the empires, the ideologies, the markets, and

all the other secondary realities that are meant to serve human good, but which end up thinking that they're God. So Jesus' cross stands at the turning point of human history, judging and revealing all other versions of human greatness, of human leadership, of human order, of human stability. It reveals the reality of our sinful world, where sovereignty in society regularly lets us down; yet it also reveals the loving heart of God, who subverts and transforms things from within—a God who won't be annexed to the status quo as its ultimate guarantor and preserver. Christ the King isn't against Kings, or presidents for that matter. But he is God with us, God for us, supporting the structures of our world where they serve God's justice and compassion, but exposing them and undermining them and hastening their end when they lose the plot.

In this reality of Jesus Christ the Church finds its identity and calling, as our Colossians reading concludes today. The Church of the crucified Jesus, the Church whose Lord was universally condemned as a rebel and as a disgrace to polite religion, is a risky bet if we're looking for the respectable and the conventional. Our baptism isn't a mark of conventionality and respectability as much as our enlistment in an adventure, and who knows where we'll end up in Jesus' company? Christ the King, who claims us in baptism, who reclaims us in love with every Eucharist, points beyond the powers that be in this world, and all its conventional prudential wisdom, to where our deepest loyalty, our truest identity and our ultimate obedience lie.

The Lord be with you...