

Sunday 22 November: Christ the King

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Readings: Revelation 1.4b-8; John 18.33-37

King, president, prime minister, managing director, chief executive, boss, head of department, supervisor, bishop even...chief priest, governor. When we hear these kinds of titles we cannot help our minds conjuring up all sorts of associations; about responsibilities, areas of influence, relationships of power and authority, domains and spheres of influence. And we can't help but judge our own position in relation to them. One or two of us may have heard our own title read out, or maybe one that we aspire to.

Just this week two rather low-key European politicians have leapt into the headlines as Europe elects its Foreign Minister and President of the European Council. Now everyone needs to know their names, following the political jostling that has been going on behind the scenes (Cathy Ashton, Herman van Rompuy). It is easy to look with some distance at power trading on the international stage but what about closer to home where the affects of authority and power and influence affect us? There is no sphere of our lives where authority and power do not hold sway and influence, in our workplaces, our homes, our church too.

On this last Sunday before Advent, when we celebrate the festival of Christ the King, it is good to reflect on where authority lies in our lives and just how much the kingship of Christ and the qualities of his kingdom guide and direct our actions and decisions, and how much we allow ourselves to conform to the power structures of our world and the *mini-kingdoms* to which we belong. In our Gospel today, as Pilate and Jesus come head to head in this interrogation, Pilate hones in on the idea of kingship. Whereas Pilate interprets this in terms of authority, position and power, for Jesus being a king means living in truth, in the freedom of the life of his kingdom.

In our workplaces, wherever that may be, there is always an ethos that creates the working environment. It can take many forms; a culture of excellence, of respect and hard work, that encourages people to give of their best. But it can also be about power politics, bullying, fear and intimidation. How that ethos is set usually comes from the top and is about the good use or mis-use of power. A teacher friend talked to me the other day about how she left a job she was good at in a particular school because the head teacher created such a culture of bullying and uncertainty, that she just couldn't face working amidst such unhappiness. Similarly families too can become mini fiefdoms. Someone who happened into the church some weeks ago described a family situation where one member had such a grip over everyone else that there was a climate of fear, which meant that family members could not communicate properly. The result was that important things remained unspoken under the surface. This silence had led to the break up of normal family life and mental illness. In all spheres of our lives there is the potential for the same misuse of power.

Once we are in these situations it is very hard to break out of them or change them. Even the simplest office has its politics; ways to get up and get on, often at others' expense. The pressure and ethos often seems to be to 'put others down as you have been put down yourself' – (something I experienced when working in the film and television business). It is very easy to slip into that kind of culture and be defined and bound by it so that we lose our freedom and lose the truth of who we are. It takes courage to step outside, to stand up to bullying, to lay down your tools and turn off your computer when the culture is one of overwork, to speak

out when the culture encourages silence. To hold on to the truth of a situation when the climate is one of denial.

We see Pilate himself falling into line with the power and authority of *his* day, against his better judgement. Three times in this chapter he says that he can find no case against Jesus. But when he realises that releasing Jesus will set him against the emperor, and put his position at risk, he finally offers Jesus up to be crucified; politics, self-interest and fear precipitating evil.

In the scene we have in our reading today Pilate asks Jesus if he is the king of the Jews. Obsessed with power and influence he cannot bear the idea of a threat to his own rule. Jesus responds, suggesting that by not conforming to the expected patterns, his disciples *already* demonstrate that the ways of his kingdom follow different rules - a sign of what his kingship means; a sign that his kingdom is already present. But Pilate, unable to free himself from the idea that Jesus is a threat, is closed to the possibilities of life that Jesus is opening up before him. The freedom of the life of the kingdom, not the power of a king.

As well as being controlled and buffeted by the power structures of our day, what is it that makes us, like Pilate, sometimes chose un-freedom and want to hold onto power and influence? Perhaps it is the chance to put ourselves at the centre of our world. It is very tempting to put ourselves in that place, to hold the strings, control situations and relationships and colleagues, so that our needs are met first, we are the ones that get the promotion or the recognition, or the ones that people want to be seen with.

What Jesus demonstrates with Pilate is the refusal to take up power. To lay power aside. To seek for something else instead. Jesus allows truth rather than power to be the mark of who he is.

Jesus talks of his kingdom as not being from the world, not 'from here'. This 'otherness' of the kingdom might suggest that Jesus is out of touch with our world or distant from it. But what he is actually describing is a way of being *more* in touch. Not confined by the power play of our kingdoms – our political and socio-economic structures, our international relations, our business systems, our family dynamics – Jesus places himself at the centre of life. It is here that he holds out truth – a way for us to live by.

We see in this scene Jesus' vulnerability as he stands before Pilate. Holding to the truth of who he is and what he represents, in spite of the violence and forces of evil and power play going on around him. But this place of vulnerability is also a place of freedom.

Earlier in the Gospel Jesus spoke these words to those who believed in him; '*If you make my word your home you will indeed be my disciples, you will learn the truth and the truth will make you free.*' (8.31-2). If we live where Jesus is we are set free to live with his values and know his truth in our lives. Living where Jesus is, is where love is.

This place of his kingdom is a vulnerable place to be - without the confines of the mini kingdoms and systems of the world that set the parameters and judge how we are to behave. The only thing that defines Jesus' kingdom is living in his love and truth. The way to do that is to do what he does.

Rather than take up his authority and power Jesus lays it aside, for others out of love, holding nothing back, giving up his life for us. His kingdom is not about defending a place, or about influence or power. It is where he welcomes others. He is the servant king, who washes the

feet of his disciples, heals the sick, brings freedom to those who are bound by injustice and fear. It is a place of life and hope and freedom.

Jesus calls us to free ourselves from the confines of our false kingdoms, from the restrictions they place upon us and the temptations they offer us to take control. To step aside, and allow his love to be at the centre of our lives and define all that we do. As we do that we will grasp the truth of our lives, and the hope that he holds out for us.

In this place of love, he will call us to love and service. The one who is – our healer, friend, brother, encourager, servant, king.