

Christ the King Sunday C

November 25, 2007: Wesley 9:00 & 10:30am

**Colossians 1: 11-20 & Luke 23: 33-43**

You may remember the scene from Jesus Christ Superstar when Jesus and the disciples are approaching Jerusalem. Simon the Zealot urges Jesus to go ahead, start the revolution, and become King. 'Jesus', he says, 'you will thereby get the power and the glory'. Jesus, in reply, sadly tells Simon that neither he, nor anyone else, knows what true power and glory are. And he goes down the way of the cross, the way which unmask all earthly powers.

The power of the suffering love of God is stronger than the power of Caesar. That is the truth that the early Church stumbled upon, it having been revealed to them by the one who decided not to take 'Simon's' advice. Because of him, they came to recognise what most of us fail to fully comprehend (and can that be any surprise when it is so contrary to all we see?): that the power of the suffering love of God, in Christ, reigns. It reigns in heaven and it reigns upon earth.

The powers of this world have inspired some courage. That is true. But what can match the acts of courage and love and hope that have entered our world, that have inspired your life and mine, because people have been touched by the power of Christ's suffering love? What power in the world is there that reigns like that power? " The power that inspired Peter, James, John, Paul and the early church to martyrdom? " The power that inspired Martin Luther King, or Desmond Tutu, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or Mahatma Ghandi, or Mother Theresa, or William Wilberforce, or Oscar Romero, and the list could go on.

If our new 'king' in Australia, or any other worldly leader for that matter, thinks they have that kind of dominion among people, then they are living an illusion.

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This is the true wonder of the gospel and, in truth, the most difficult thing to comprehend and explain: in God's absolute freedom, and in love for the world, the grace and power of the maker of heaven and earth are revealed, not on a throne, but on a cross; not via an election, but via a death sentence; not via monied interests, but via nails and the power of a message. And that power released through the suffering love of Christ, is matched by nothing that man or woman can create for themselves; And that is why we call him King. He has no match - not money, or violence, or philosophy, or ideology can stand beside the power released by the cross of Christ the King.

When a lone Chinese student stood before a tank in Tiananmen Square in 1989 holding nothing but a shopping bag in each hand, standing before tanks that were rolling their way toward the Tiananmen Square massacre, blood behind them and more blood to come ahead of them, the breath went out of my chest. It was an image that flashed across the world. The power of the tank, and the power of courage; self-less

courage. How many of us thought the real power of life, on that day, was residing in the tanks? The real power that can save our world - Was it with the tanks? Or was it with whatever was inside that young man's mind and heart when he stepped out to place his life in the way of the violence?

The young man was probably - so they say - found and executed. But he won. His was the real power. His power is timeless. And there are others that we can name. Martin Luther King is shot dead by a gunman in Memphis. Oscar Romero is shot dead by a gunman in San Salvador (while he was celebrating Communion)

Another bigger tank coming up against those tanks and defeating them in Tiananmen would have held no power over our spirit, or moral imagination.

Martin Luther King Jr deciding to fight racist fire with racist fire instead of peaceful non co-operation, would have held no power over our spirit, or moral imagination.

Jesus Christ deciding to proclaim himself king and hurl into the Roman army with a band of Zealots in order to reclaim Jerusalem for God would have held no power over our spirit, or moral imagination. As the Jesus character in Jesus Christ Superstar said to Simon the Zealot, there would go just another who does not understand what true power and glory are. But he did understand. The cycle had to be broken.

Christ's singular, selfless act of courage has held millions in its power, and brought the same power to life in others.

As I prepared for this Christ the King sermon I had before me a favourite image, a sketch by a Mexican artist, drawn in the 1970's. Jesus is on the cross, very thin, with his ribs protruding, and a crown of thorns on his sagging, heavy head. And guarding him around the base of the cross are three military officers, wearing helmets and carrying weapons as they circle the dying man. They are the thugs who have brutalized the weakling. They are actually (I thought when I looked at it again) the tanks which are about to be brought to a standstill by a lone man carrying nothing. The sketch is headed "The power of the powerless".

In Luke we read that, having been mocked by criminals and soldiers, Jesus said: Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. If Jesus were to have fought back, joined the revolutionaries, responded with violence, taken on the Romans at their own game, then we would have no King. Only the power that knows forgiveness, trust, compassion, integrity and selfless love can bring in the kingdom. It is the only power that can save.

There are powers and dominions in the world. That is not just New Testament-times naivety. Our lives are caught up by the power of so many things...

The early followers of Jesus came to believe that he epitomised the power that stood above them all. To use Paul's words: he is the image of the invisible God... in him

all things, dominions and powers, seen and unseen, have met their maker... for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell... and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things... by making peace through the blood of his cross.

In our celebration of Christ the King Sunday there are few places in the Bible where the extent of the reign of Christ is more sweepingly and eloquently expressed than in the grand affirmations of the letter to the Colossians. It can seem a nonsense, in a way. How on earth can this Palestinian Jew be spoken of as "the first-born of all creation", "the beginning, the firstborn of the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything"? But it's not nonsense. Yes, the language is poetic and fixed for the time in which Paul wrote. Then, there were those who believed the gods of the sea determined the success or failure of your voyage; and that if you were going to war you'd better make an offering to Mars, the god of war. They thought in terms of "principalities and powers" in ways far removed from Canberra, 2007 - and spoke of what they had witnessed and experienced with Jesus in language to match.

But is this so far removed? Are we so far removed from a world in which there are things that reign over us that shouldn't? I don't mean "powers" in terms of a figure with red horns and tail, but the powers that, we know, only diminish life. The power of consumerism The power of unaddressed poverty The power of strong over weak and so on...

Colossians affirms that God has 'transferred' the faithful into the kingdom of his beloved son. It means that we have been saved from the reign of things such as these and awakened to the kingdom of life. Tom Wright says that the word "transferred" suggests being relocated to a new place, or a new calling, moved out of the arena of death and disorder and into a new a fully reconciled life with God. We have been transferred into the kingdom of his own beloved son. It gives grateful meaning to the prayerful words: Your kingdom come, your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven.

The power of the suffering love of God is stronger than the power of Caesar. That is the point that Paul has grasped. That is the point the church must humbly proclaim, even while other powers lay hold of so many (even us), and even while so many ridicule the possibility. That is the point of Christ the King Sunday: There are powers, and there is a Power.

As one of the criminals beside him on the cross said: 'Jesus, remember me, when you come into your Kingdom'.