

John 18: 28-38 (Revelation 1: 1-8)  
Christ the King, Year B

St Aidan's and Wesley 10:30 a.m.  
25 November 2012

### Pledge of Allegiance

During my recent visit with my Dad in the US, he took me to his Lions Club meeting. I was happy enough to have a restaurant meal and meet his friends, and so forth. But I hadn't counted on the tradition of the first agenda item being the Pledge of Allegiance. Not only do I think it's pretty silly, really, to pledge allegiance to a flag (even with the later reference to “the republic for which it stands”), I could not say the words—in fact, I couldn't even remember them properly! Over the years my allegiance has changed, and Australia is my true home—being Australian now my true national identity (despite the lingering accent). That's a bit sad in terms of my ties to the past, but it's mostly just lovely, peaceful and joyous. I know who I am and where I belong.

It seems to me that's what the church needs to know too. *To what and to whom is our true allegiance bound? Who are we really? Where in the world do we belong?* The theme of this Sunday is supposed to help us answer those questions, but I fear it may have the opposite effect of only further confusing the issue. That's why, if it were up to me 'Christ the King Sunday' would not exist.

Actually, 'Christ the King Sunday' is a very late addition to the church's calendar anyway, and knowing its history is part of my problem with it. It was only in 1925 that Pope Pius XI instituted the 'Feast of Christ the King' in his encyclical letter *Quas Primas* as an expression of his concern about the increasing nationalism and secularism in the world. He connected these political and social changes to a denial of Christ as king and the decreasing power and influence of the Church; he was also openly sceptical of democracy and civil law, and wanted to reassert the Church's power as a universal right. Dangerous thinking that continues to lead to terrible consequences.

But I think the biggest problem with *Quas Primas* was that it simply defied its own title; supposed to be about 'what is first or primary,' he put the Church first rather than Jesus. Even when expressing the positive hope for the real power and influence of Jesus in human life, this declaration limited the response to an 'in-house' church context—and for Pius that meant only the Roman Catholic Church. Though later adopted by many Protestant Churches (but not, interestingly, by most Orthodox churches) this festival became increasingly weighted down by its own lack of theological purpose. Pius XI may have asked the right question: *What is rightly the first, most important, most authoritative power in our lives?* But he came up with the wrong answer. It's not the church, not at least except where the church itself knows its own existence is always and *only* for proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ—the love, the peace, the joy that is possible when humanity reality is totally connected to

the mystery of God.

If it were up to me, in fact, *all* monarchical references to Jesus would be permanently expunged from every liturgical aspect of our worship every week—not found in hymns, prayers, poems, anthems, printed liturgy, and certainly not in sermons! You'll note, I hope, that I'm not suggesting that monarchical language, even in reference to Jesus, should also be deleted from scripture; I totally understand why such language exists there as the only culturally appropriate way to describe power and authority during the time when both Hebrew and Christian scripture was written. But it has no place in Christian worship of the 21<sup>st</sup> century precisely because it is no longer descriptive of real power and authority in this time.

Anyway, if you, like me, worry about ways in which the church (our own and/or any other) has gone wrong, it's quite easy to see that in every such instance it has been a matter of self-promoting, self-protecting, self-preserving arrogance—having nothing whatsoever to do with the reality of Jesus' life or his teachings. People all over the world are 'voting with their feet', moving away from an institution that is failing in its own primary mission—and leaving the rest of us who are still involved in the church to wonder how we can do better in the future. I encourage all of you to read Annabel Crabb's article in this morning's *Canberra Times*, in which she says:

But how can you remove a church from society, and expect to have anything left? The more we hear about exemptions for churches—from property laws, from the criminal codes, from the presumptions of equality that have advanced inexorably over the past century and continue to advance—the less one is surprised by congregation shrinkage.

How can we do better? I think we could make a good beginning by finding better, healthier and holier answers to *Quas Primas*. What *is* first, most important, absolutely essential for us—as individuals, as communities and nations, as families and churches—what *is* primal and primary?

Well, if it were up to me...and by now perhaps you are giving thanks that it's *not* up to me...but if it *were* up to me, we would firstly stop using most of the long-familiar 'power-over' ways to describe Jesus: King, Lord, Sovereign, Master. None of these are the truth of his real 'power-for' and 'power-within' complete authority in our lives and in the world. None of these were titles Jesus himself embraced. This may send you back to the Bible to prove me wrong—and that's okay, as I always like to encourage people to actually read the Bible. But, if memory and concordance study serves me right, Jesus only comfortably responds to being called 'Rabbi' (or 'Teacher') and 'Son of Man' (an historical term to denote a person chosen by God for an earthly

mission).

The first three gospels share the story of Jesus asking his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” The responses vary slightly but Peter's answer is usually translated as “You are the Messiah” or “You are the Christ.” 'Messiah' is the Hebrew word for a religious leader chosen by God to save humanity from evil; 'Christ' is the Greek translation of 'Messiah' and literally means “anointed one,” so these coincide with 'Son of Man.' And we should note that in Mark and Luke's accounts Jesus orders the disciples not to tell anyone who they think he is; only Matthew infers that Jesus accepts this title. [Matt. 16.13-20; Mark 8: 27-33; Luke 9: 18-22]

All four gospels include the story of Pilate's questioning of Jesus (we heard John's version today) and all the writers indicate that Jesus rejected—or at least evaded—agreeing to the title 'King of the Jews' though it's clear that some of his followers must have called him this or at least that his enemies accused him of claiming this. Even when Jesus says “My kingdom is not from this world” in his very next breath he refuses to accept Pilate's challenge to actually call himself a king.

So I'm very happy to call Jesus any of the names and titles he allowed to himself. But 'King'? No, I'd rather not. Of course I recognise there is a problem with how to come up with any other titles that mean something similar in contemporary context; 'President,' 'Prime Minister,' or 'Chairperson' just don't do it! And I'm not sure I could actually hope and pray for the coming of a 'Republic' of Heaven. But, then, that very difficulty is part of my thesis: the church needs to find new ways to describe to what and to whom our primary allegiance is bound.

Who *are* we really? Where in the world *do* we belong? What *is* rightly the first, most important, most authoritative power in our lives?

Is it *really* Christ the King? Or is it instead Jesus the Christ—inspired teacher, compassionate healer and eternally devoted friend? Is it he who (in his own words) “came into the world to testify to the truth” and promised that those who “belong to the truth and listen to his voice” [John 18: 37] would share in the freedom and victory of his life? Is it he who showed us not only the full reality of God but the full potential of humanity? Is it he whose love was so great, whose peace was so deep, whose joy was so immense that not even death could vanquish him? I hope so. I do very much hope so!

By our baptism we always belong to him; so may our lives always reflect the honour of his true and holy name. Amen.

Rev. Janis Huggett