No Kings

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Year A, Ordinary 34
Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24, Matthew 25: 31-46
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Last week our events manager Dmitry received an email requesting a celebrant for an upcoming wedding. The message said, "While looking at photos of weddings held at St Matthew's, we came across one with a particular priest — an older gentleman with a beard and glasses, in white and gold vestments. He struck us as genuinely warm and kind, and if it is at all possible, we would love for him to be the one who conducts our ceremony."

Sadly, for me, the attached picture confirmed the older gentleman being asked for, was in fact me. I will admit, given that I don't feel a day over 21, being described as an older gentleman was disappointing.

One of the great overarching psychological theories of the last half century is called cognitive dissonance. This theory suggests that we all journey through life with a perception of who we are and what we are like. Sometimes we run into a piece of information that seems at odds with our self-perception. This creates a state of stress called cognitive dissonance, the problem of trying to hold two conflicting pieces of information at the same time. The theory suggests that we will try to resolve that stress in the simplest way possible. Typically, the easiest option is the one that preserves what we thought about ourselves in the first place.

It is easier for me to persist with the self-belief that I look younger than my years, than it is to accept that some clearly deluded people look at me and perceive a kindly older gentleman.

So, what does any of that have to do with our readings set down for this Sunday. This particular day is known by many names, but most typically as the Feast of Christ the King. We don't typically talk about Christ the King in this church, because let's be honest, many of us don't

like the idea of any sort of King. The political reality of a single unelected person holding power over us is not one we should endorse. Many of us would in fact align with the No Kings protests that have happened in the US in recent times. And this creates a problem, because if we don't like the notion of Kings, what are we to do with all the references we find to Christ being a King.

When I think of Christ the King, I always reach for the primary source of all Christian Theology. No, I don't mean the bible, I mean the hymn book. How about these words:

At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow,
every tongue confess him King of glory now.

Or how about:

Christ triumphant, ever reigning,
Saviour, Master, King!
Lord of heaven, our lives sustaining,
hear us as we sing:
Yours the glory and the crown,
the high renown, the eternal name.

Great tune, but with some theology that we need to reflect on. How do such ideas fit into our world today. Christianity was born within a particular political context. The first followers of Jesus were people suffering from the oppression of the Roman Empire. When studying classics at High School I can remember hearing some very good press for the wonders of the Roman Empire, which from a certain perspective is true. To have been a Roman citizen when the Empire was at its peak was to enjoy a privileged lifestyle. But Empires are ruthless things, that survive and flourish through conquest and oppression. Even with only a fleeting understanding of economics most of us can appreciate that any economy is a closed system, and that wealth in one part of the system necessitates deprivation in another.

Early Christians were critical of the Roman dictators, essentially the Kings of that time, largely because many were victims of Empire. Their response to Roman conquest was to elevate Christ to a level higher than the Roman Emperors. If the Emperor was the greatest power on Earth,

Christ needed to be the greatest ruler in Heaven and Earth. This is where the language of King of Kings and Lord of Lords begins. These affirmations are deeply subversive in a culture in which the greatest earthly power, the emperor, was understood as being divine. The claim that Jesus had ascended to Heaven where he reigns for eternity was a direct attack on the politics at the heart of the Empire. It was a way of claiming allegiance to a higher power, but in doing so also provided a strong critique of the oppression of Roman rule.

To call Jesus a King is to provide an image of divine rule that clashed with the earthly rule of Caesar. Whereas Caesar indulged some and persecuted many, Christ the King offered love, acceptance, and peace to all.

There is also something of a satirical edge to this idea. Satire is defined as the use of humour, irony, exaggeration, to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of politics. To suggest that Jesus, a first century Jewish peasant, an itinerant preacher and healer out on the conquered fringes of the empire, is actually the King above all Kings, is deeply satirical. It's a way of saying to the oppressing Romans, look how ridiculous your values, your empire, your ruler is. This person who you say is of the lowest value, is actually of greater value than all of the trappings of empire. And if that's true for Jesus, it is also true for those of us who reject the rules of empire to follow him. That is the statement intended by the enormous window above our high altar. That is a political window reminding us that human kings create inequality, injustice and oppression.

When we name Christ as King, we are doing so to reject all human dictators by saying that the only one who should hold power over us is the one who gave all power away.

Sadly, this original understanding of the language of Christ enthroned in Heaven, became divorced from the context in which it arose, largely due to Christianity becoming the official religion of the Empire. The failure to understand Christ as a King as a critique of human rulers, resulted in many examples of Christian Empires that behaved as ruthlessly as any other human empire.

If we are to continue to speak of Christ as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, we must understand that the Empire of God is radically different to any empire of human making. Jesus told his followers that this new empire of God was to be based on two principles, love of God and love of each other. And more than that, in our Gospel today Jesus tells us that the empire of God requires a drastic shift in our perception. If we are to bring about God's reign on earth, we need to move our attention away from the powerful, the successful, the famous, and find those in our communities who are not seen and are not heard. In the parable Jesus clearly places God's presence among those who are on the margins. The hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner. Shifting our perception away from the privileged and towards the underprivileged is just the start. Christ also calls us to shift our perception away from ourselves and towards the needs of others.

This Sunday is traditionally understood as being the last Sunday of the Church year. Next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent and a new year begins with our journey towards Christmas. As this new year begins, I encourage you to challenge yourself to see the needs in this community and beyond this community. This may feel uncomfortable, but finding the courage to see the unseen and hear the unheard may just result in discovering God's presence in our very midst. Amen.