



By What Ruler Will We Live?

Rev Cate Thorn

Year C, Sunday before Advent

Jeremiah 23: 1-6; Luke 23:33-43

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So here we are, the last Sunday of the church year. The church's New Year's Eve. A time to look back at what's been, to consider who and where we are a year on, to think of priorities for the coming year. In a church year, we follow a liturgical calendar. You could understand over the year we trace the life of Jesus - if we don't look too closely or expect historical accuracy. The birth and death of Jesus are quite proximate to one another. Throughout the year we follow the story of Jesus' life and influence through the lens of one of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark or Luke. The gospel of John gets a look in at particular times or seasons in the year. So, there's a sort of chronology and not. Feast days marking significant events in the life of the church and saint's days, also intersperse the year. The seasons of the church year, the liturgical material associated with the calendar, colour, imagery and so forth evolved from a Northern Hemisphere context, which can feel upside down in our Southern hemisphere context.

This liturgical tradition names the Sunday before Advent Christ the King Sunday. I know, I know, we don't celebrate that here, even the Reign of Christ's too much. There are other options, we can celebrate instead Aotearoa Sunday or Ordinary 34, or the Sunday before Advent. I get that we find this King imagery unhelpful. But, given that it occurs at the end of the year, the ending triumph of the life cycle of Jesus, some sort of claim is being made by this statement. I think it's worth wrestling with. Not to try and agree with it, not to contort ourselves into compliance. But to ask ourselves, after this last year, looking back, thinking forward, how would we name Christ? What

word/s resonate with whatever it is we imagine Christ to be for us. Divine presence knowable in human form. Allowing we may feel we've no idea, don't know for certain, experience absence and that this is real and valid. Perhaps it's more accurate to ask what it is the idea of this opens in us, opens us up to.

Christ the King Sunday follows on the heels of last Sunday's readings. Isaiah's imagery of a world restored and life flourishing. The gospel of Temple destruction, with apocalyptic imagery and messaging Wilf so helpfully unpacked last week. Jesus inviting his followers to see through the grandeur of Temple might, of Empire. To not respond to what appears end-time destruction, under persecution, to not join those proclaiming judgement and spreading narratives of despair. Rather, to trust in God, in divine presence beneath, within, continuing, threaded through life, through us.

We can look at the history that likely influences our reaction to the church's kingly claim. Own that the church, from humble outsider beginnings, first became Empire's religion under Constantine. Joined the Empire's drive to colonize, capture and dominate. This may be the core of our distaste for celebrating Christ as king. Today's growing irrelevance of church for many and its declining capacity to influence might free us from obligation, bondage. Yet such identity continues to permeate church structure, the church still operates as it knows, according to the systems of the ruling powers. And in certain places still, some, under the rubric of church, weaponise God to serve their own ends.

Is it possible for us to claim some less Empire associated identity for Christ? Christ as king but inverted. One who insists on the inherent worth of all living beings, and shuns power over, power humanly gained, even to death. But what does that mean in real life? As soon as we put an absolute claim out there, it seems to me, we use it as a rallying point, something to gather and build identity around. Something that becomes our imagining of what we think we mean.

I've been wondering lately about this hope we hold onto, of a different world order. The impossibility of such a notion as we look

around the world. In all the history of human civilization, very few years have been without war. When we imagine a new order, a world that embodies the life and spirit of God, is it fundamentally different from the society as we know it, or does it just have a different skin? Do we hope this skin will lead to different outcomes than what we have now?

It seems to me this is most unlikely. We may overlay the language of Empire by declaring this leadership, this 'king-ness' is different, an alternate model, a different type of king, a different way of rule but does it translate? If we displace the **ideology** of one king for another but do nothing to change the structure or systems? This happens not because we're unwilling or ill intended but because we don't know **how** to live differently. We've learned what we know. They may be flawed but the systems and structures we see as **necessary** to maintain order. For effective transacting between nations and people in an increasingly complex world. Without their protection, the world may descend into chaos. At least that's what we've learned. Trust the systems, distrust relationships, the inherently dangerous, potentially inconsistent, needing always to be negotiated, not entirely reliable vulnerability of relationship. Whether relationship within the human construct or relationship with the wildness of creation – which seems to do quite well when left to its own chaotic rhythm.

To think and talk of kings and empire, is to think and talk about power. Human systems of power over, hierarchies where resources diminish as they descend. It's easy for us to think of these as immutable realities. Unless you have power or influence at the top you can effect no change. So, we think macro and before macro we're very micro. Insignificant before all that's taking place. Disempowered, our capacity to think we can change things diminished. Helpless despite the fire in our belly.

We can't change everything and we don't have to. The thought, the desire to wield such power to enact our preferred outcomes makes us no different than those in the system we challenge. What we **can** do is participate in the change we imagine. Take the chance on doing,

exploring and testing what it is to share power, to collaborate rather than dominate. It's easy to be distracted by the macro – it's big and loud and insistent and overwhelming. But we're enormously empowered in our micro context – To quote the Dalai Lama: "If you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito." We do need around us those who also tell this alternate insistent story, so we remember and enact it when and where we are.

A Theo-Poetic Word for This Week Roberto Che Espinoza

Beloveds, the world is ending again.
Not the world of rivers and mycelium and ancestors.
Not the world of breath and bodies and shared meals.
But the world that harms—the world that lies—the world that builds "saviors" out of violence.
Let it end.
Let the illusions fall so we can finally see.
Let the false messiahs fade so we can finally refuse.
Let empire crack so imagination can run free.
And while the old world collapses, listen closely:
There is a hum rising beneath your feet.
A new world, tender and fierce, aching to be born.
Isaiah has seen it.
Jesus has named the clarity we need to reach it.
You can feel it in your chest even now.
Advent Contra Empire is the invitation to midwife that world with our bodies, our breath, our courage, and our care.¹