

On kings, and kingdom language

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 21 November 2021

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

The Reign, or Community, of Christ or Christ the King B

1 Samuel: 8; Revelations 1: 4-8;
Contemporary Reading: *The Kingdom*, by R S Thomas

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Growing up, even as a little child, I was fascinated by what was then known as the English Civil War (although, to be accurate historically, this is now rightly recognised as several different wars across the islands of Britain and Ireland). It was a bitter and brutal period, culminating in the judicial trial and execution of the King. For this was most certainly a powerful revolution. Indeed it saw the establishment of a republic, the Commonwealth and Protectorate under Oliver Cromwell. Moreover, in that latter period there was also an extraordinary flowering of truly radical religious and political life and thought.

That, I think, was what especially drew me into the study of history. For the origin of many things we take for granted lie there. For example, the insistence on no taxation or legislation without representation, on regular elections, fixed parliamentary terms, equal votes, and, vitally, on religious freedom for different types of groups, particularly the marginalised. Indeed, Cromwell even reopened England to the Jews, who had been banned for centuries. For his supporters were also part of the movements which helped create Congregationalism, the original founding tradition of Pitt Street Uniting Church.

Now, not everything such people did was healthy or wise, even in their own context. They certainly resisted some amazing people, not least extraordinary pioneer women, who wanted to go further in terms of both political and religious liberty. They also have the notorious reputation of having 'cancelled Christmas'. Above all, Cromwell's soldiers were brutal in Ireland. Yet, imperfect though it was, core to their lives, faith and politics was an understanding of God as the source of liberty. Their real opponents were therefore those who most obviously sought to deny others what Cromwell prized as 'liberty of conscience'.

This particularly included the then highly autocratic alliance of the monarchy and Church of England, and the then absolutist character of the papacy and Roman Catholic monarchs of their day. Sadly, after the violence of war, they also found that others were similarly seeking to impose their own form of religion on others. This was one key factor behind Cromwell's taking of power. Pitt Street therefore partly stands in that lineage, not least when we look at the Pitt Street church motto on the arch above me:

'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty' (2 Corinthians 3.17),

It is, I think, such a clear commitment to liberty of conscience in both the personal and public space. As we struggle today with more repressive ideas of what religious 'freedom' might be, it is worth recollecting.

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For, like our progenitors, we too may stumble at times in our response. What however is the Spirit of the Lord and liberty for us today? What is the next step in divine revolution?

How would you name this Sunday? Do you think that *Divine Revolution* might be another name for this Sunday? Or maybe, to pick up our motto, *Liberty Sunday*? It is tricky to find an agreed title for this Sunday in our lectionary – isn't it? To be honest, Christ the King, the Kingdom of Christ, or even the Reign of Christ, aren't titles which warm the heart of everyone - are they?

However, other phrases, like the Community of Christ, tend to lose some of the theological tension and the political significance which kingship represents in the Christian tradition. As such, this Sunday challenges us to approach our language and metaphors for God in an expansive manner. It reminds us that the search for God-language which can straightforwardly encompass everyone is ultimately illusory. God, the divine mystery, is always so much bigger than any language we use. Many, many, different words and metaphors are needed when we enter into theological conversation.

How, do you feel about the words 'king' and 'kingdom'? As may already be obvious to some of you, I am a life-long republican. As I am English, as well as Australian, some people are surprised, not least in Anglican circles. They should not be. For whilst English elites like to hide this, English history is full of dissent and revolt, including other deep radical traditions: seeking better ways to live together and share God's common wealth. My reading of history has also amply confirmed the misdeeds of monarchs, who - when they did not inflict such things themselves - have lived off their ancestors' plundering of land, unjust taxes, harsh laws, extraordinary abuses and mystifications of power. All of which brings us to our first reading this morning, from Samuel.

Now, if you are a monarchist, do relax! As I will go on to say in a moment, sacral kingship is also a very significant theme in both the Bible and wider Judaeo-Christian traditions. Indeed, I want to share something of what I understand to be the spiritual significance of the biblical metaphors of king and kingdom. I most certainly do not believe we should lose these, in either our theology or liturgical devotion, whatever political configurations we favour.

However, even a dyed-in-the-wool monarchist would have to admit that today's reading from 1 Samuel chapter 8 constitutes a powerful cry against monarchy. For at this point in Israel's history, God, through the prophet Samuel, finally agrees to what the people are demanding: a king. Yet, in doing so, the prophet makes very clear the negative consequences. Samuel's God seems to have been, at best, a reluctant monarchist.

Why do you think the people of God wanted a king? Was it perhaps, as 1 Samuel affirms, because they could then see themselves as a 'proper' nation, like all the others which had kings, with their pomp and ceremonies? Was it because they were tired of working through issues and needs together, sometimes quite painfully? Was it because they felt that a more hierarchical arrangement would be more effective and less onerous? Was it because personalising authority gives a human focus for a nation, just as a bishop can also do for a Church?

Or was it simply that all political and religious structures are capable of corruption, including republics of various kinds? It certainly seems that Samuel's sons were betraying a more egalitarian vision. Actually, these are not bad reasons to consider at least a constitutional monarchy.

Yet they do need to be set in the much more important call to acknowledge and share in the ultimate authority of God. Otherwise, they not only become a distraction, but a danger. That, above all, is what our first reading is saying.

Republican or monarchist, and the Bible does not commit us straightforwardly to be either, the kingship of God matters. For the language of sacral kingship and lordship is there for a very good reason. It is there to protect the people of God against the usurpation of power and the ownership of deep and powerful metaphors by others.

For it relativises all human claims to power and subverts all the pretensions and pomposities which powerful people and political structures foster. It directs us back to what really matters as foundations for our lives and societies. It recalls us to the utterly subversive, transformative, nature of God. For, whether with a monarchy, or in other ways, the only true sovereign is God. Not for nothing then do hymns thus speak of a particular kind of kingship: the sovereignty of the King of Love – as only Love is ultimate.

Historically speaking, it is my sense that, without knowing and proclaiming God as King - above all human authorities - there could never have been an English Revolution. Indeed, without knowing God as the ultimate authority, in the paradox of grace and power, there could never have been a Reformation. This was also notably central to the Reformed Church's resistance to Nazi Germany. Above all, without knowing and proclaiming Christ as King, the early Christians would not have been able to challenge the brutalities of the Roman Empire as they did, and thereby renew biblical religion with a fresh emphasis on the centrality of divine love, and God's love alone as truly sovereign.

Certainly, the repeated refrain of Zwingli, Calvin, Barth, and other great progenitors of the Uniting Church is that the sovereignty of God, the power of divine love, is the ultimate source and foundation of loving lives and healthy societies – and this is reflected in the language of the UCA's Basis of Union. No wonder then that, with other Churches, the Uniting Church concludes our lectionary year with this emphasis this Sunday. For this particular Sunday is intended to be a joyous proclamation of the sovereignty of God's love, in all its rich dimensions – intimate, relational, and cosmic.

Emphasis on sacral kingship appears again and again in the Bible, including in the last book, from which our second reading comes today. In highly dramatic language, this speaks of God as ultimate, both beginning and end, Alpha and Omega in the Greek alphabet, be all and end all. It spoke originally into the lives of despised, struggling, deeply oppressed, threatened people and sets them in a wholly new light. They, as the Bible says elsewhere, are not simply the outcast of society.

Vulnerable, wounded, and often attacked as they are, in God's eyes they are in fact part of the true kingdom. They are the priests of the ultimate power – namely God's love and mercy – which rules all of time and creation. What a message of hope that was, and still is today, to so many in our world! However bad things get, John's strange vision affirms, the outcast will see and know God – for God is ultimate: love is the true sovereign of the universe.

How do we handle king and kingdom language today? Now some of us might still struggle with this, as more progressive Christians in another age. Like the language of divine 'lordship', divine kingship can seem not only culturally alien but, at times, very kyriarchal. There is also no doubt at all, that, like divine 'father' language, both kingship and lordship have been used to bolster and promote injustice in Christian tradition.

We do very well, as in our liturgy today, to balance such metaphors with a much wider and more richly diverse vocabulary. Not least, as Aboriginal priest Glenn Loughrey says, in this particular land we will want to talk about Christ as Elder rather than King.

Yet, in my view, we weaken our own faith and witness to others where we push kingship language away too far. Rather like excluding masculine pronouns for God simply on principle, we then lose something of the rich subversive complexity of our Faith. Like the Bible as a whole, we do not need to use it literally but we do need to take it seriously.

I offer such reflections a little hesitantly, as I know that some of us struggle with such metaphors, and other received constructions of faith in both our Bible and wider traditions. I also do so, not only as a republican, but also as a committed feminist and pluralist. Indeed, we need not just to honour, but to also further the progressive theological development of Pitt Street Uniting Church.

However, we should also take care not to risk too strong an aversion to divine kingship language, or treat it out of context. On occasions it is good to use some formulations which, from their particular context, use words such as *king* and *lord* in devotional, not dictatorial, terms. This allows us to remain expansive, and also to remain strongly connected to some other parts of the Christian and wider faith community. As we come towards Christmas and the birth of little Lord Jesus, the Prince of Peace, the Servant King, it is perhaps particularly important to say this.

Little Lord Jesus, like the *Servant King*, that is a deliberate paradox, almost a contradiction in terms - isn't it? That is its very point. It is not intended simply to fit - or even, on the straightforward level, to make sense. For it is meant to turn our expectations about power upside down. It is intended to revalue the marginalised and those aspects of life which are often despised.

For it is in those places that God is to be found or is being born again. Indeed, to return to where I began, if I have problems with Oliver Cromwell – and I certainly do, despite my admiration in some ways – it is that Puritanism can over reach itself. In trying to be too tidy it can lose the messiness, and take the fun, out of life. In trying to be righteous, we can take ourselves too seriously. For the God of Jesus is a playful, even a cavalier, God, who is forever subverting our attempts to make life, and language, and morality, too straightforward.

Divine kingship language is also far more than political. It is so deeply engrained in our psyches, conscious and unconscious; in our cultures, in fairy tale and folklore; and in some of the most profound expressions of spiritual intimacy, in the deep devotional life of so many of our world's great faith and wisdom traditions. When divine kingship language begins to overpower other spiritual language, it undoubtedly oppresses, sometimes horribly. Yet it exists to deepen our heart's journeys, to deconstruct efforts to trap us in other conventions, and to expand our imaginations afresh.

And so, to encourage us all to be freshly expansive in our life and our theology, let me conclude with offering up our third reading today. Written by the Welsh poet priest R S Thomas, it takes up the images of king and kingdom and invites us to turn them around, and inside out, and look at them every-which-way and beyond, and still only grasp a fraction of what God can say through them. For the kingdom of God – whatever else we may call it, and we must also find other words, even when not excluding this one - the Kingdom of God, well...

*It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.*

In the Name of Jesus, crucified by the Romans, ironically as a King, but, more truly, as bearer of a reality ever deeper and more mysterious than they, or we, can ever grasp – yet which is here among us, right now.

In the power of that transforming, liberating, sovereign grace.

Amen