

The jester and the fisher king

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 24th November 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

The Reign of Christ

Contemporary Reading: from the script of *The Fisher King* (1991) - and the part of Parry, as played by Robin Williams; John 18: 33-37

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

One of the great figures in British, not least Arthurian, mythology is the Fisher King. His origins are possibly in Welsh Celtic legend, derived from Bran the Blessed in the *Mabinogion*. Lively modern uses of the story include Terry Gilliam's (1991) fantasy comedy drama, entitled *The Fisher King*, dealing with trauma and questing for love and healing in New York, and starring Jeff Bridges and Robin Williams – a portion of whose lines we heard earlier in our contemporary reading.

For the myth continues to resonate with human struggles for personal and communal well-being, not least in the contexts of power and masculinity, and their effects on others. This is because of the mythic significance of the Fisher King, who is both the protector and physical embodiment of his realm, but who bears a wound that renders him impotent and his lands and people barren and blighted. Only the successful completion of a hero-knight's task can bring the healing of his wounds and life-giving for all.

At the end of the Church's lectionary year, as we reflect upon God's life-giving realm, and upon Christ at the centre, redeeming humanity, the Fisher King continues to open up perspectives for us and our own times. Let me therefore offer a few pointers to help tease out today's Gospel passage and the dialogue between Pilate and Jesus related to the nature of power, kingship, and human flourishing. Let me begin however, with another story, about another king, and, especially, about a jester...

For, once upon a time, the story goes, there was a court jester. For many years they were very popular with the king. The jester made him laugh and brought joy and well-being to everyone they met. That country was indeed a kingdom of joy and well-being. Then things started to go wrong. The king's chief advisers, the politicians, became greedy and unjust and the people grew fearful and violent. Their humour also became dark and cruel. The jester's wit was no longer appreciated, especially when they spoke in ways which seemed to give comfort to the poor and marginalised.

A campaign grew among the powerful to get rid of them. So the king, though he still remembered liking them very much, agreed to condemn the jester to death. To honour his past regard however, the king said that the jester could choose how they were to die.

'For example, I could have you hung, drawn and quartered', the king said, 'or thrown to hungry wolves, or boiled alive, or shot at dawn by a firing squad, or, like the aristocracy, you might have your head chopped off with a silver sword. It is your choice: there are many ways. How would you like to die? You choose and I will decree it.' So the jester thought for a brief moment and then answered: *'in that case, my Lord, I would choose to die..'* They paused... *'by old age.'* And the king roared with laughter and gave the jester their wish.

Now, unlike that king, Pilate was not able to prevent an execution. However, the Jesus and Pilate dialogue in John's Gospel does have some resonances with the jester's story, and we might fruitfully view Jesus as the jester to Pilate's fisher king. Indeed, let me also trace three features in relation to the legends of the fisher king. For each of these stories speaks similarly: firstly, about different kinds of power and life-giving authority; secondly, about how a kingdom, or realm, falls apart; and, thirdly, about how healing and flourishing is found, for a kingdom, or realm, as well as for individuals.

Firstly, our Gospel story encourages us to reflect upon what kind of power and authority we seek for our lives. *'Are you the King of the Jews?'*, Pilate asks Jesus. At immediate stake here is the stability of the Judaeian kingdom, now a Roman imperial province, over which Pilate has charge. The context includes the various forms of political resistance and rebellion, and the interests, and scheming, of the colonial forces. Yet there is more at play, as Jesus' answers open up.

'My kingdom', Jesus says, 'does not belong to this world... my kingdom is not from here.' This is a deliberately ambiguous, many-layered, and teasing response. For the contrast is not a binary one: between, for example, this earthly life and a celestial place, or between political and material existence and spiritual concerns. Whilst some have made such distinctions, there is rather a profound tension here. It is expressed in Jesus' words about how their followers would be fighting if their kingdom was like that of Pilate and his main opponents. This reflects how it is not so much that the realm of Jesus is separate from earthly realities, but rather that it possesses different qualities and ways of operating.

In relation to such scriptural texts, great theologians of the public sphere, like Augustine of Hippo and Martin Luther, have consequently rightly affirmed that God's realm, is not to be equated with human arrangements, yet is also not wholly distinct from political and other earthly struggles. Rather, the kingdom, or realm, of Christ is bound up into such struggles, without being bound to them. Thus, Augustine and Luther wrestled, as we must do, with the tensions of living in our earthly realms, those of the Pilates of this world, as well as in God's realm. For, as the Second Vatican Council (in *Gaudium et Spes*) expressed it, the Church holds that it is in Christ that we can find:

the key, the focal point and the goal of human life, as well as of all human history... all of human life, whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness.

In this, as John's Gospel witnesses, whilst political and other earthly challenges can threaten to overwhelm or consume us, we are to be centred on Christ. We are, as it were, like the jester, to keep our composure in the face of changing winds and political fashions. In other words, we are to avoid the fate of the Fisher King.

For, secondly, our Gospel story helps us recognise how human kingdoms, or realms, fall apart. As in the legends of the Fisher King, this relates to the woundedness of the human condition, reflected also in how the king in the jester's story kow-tows to the climate of fear and violence as it grows. We see this, in the Gospel encounter, in how, to begin with, Jesus does not answer Pilate directly, but replies with a different question. 'Do you ask this on your own', Jesus challenges Pilate, 'or did others tell you about me?' In other words, Jesus queries Pilate's own standing point and source of authority. Is Pilate himself in charge of himself and his realm, or is he only governed by and responding to circumstances?

The legend of the Fisher King is instructive here. For Pilate represents the failure of human leadership and of our own attempts to bring flourishing to our own lives and those of others. Indeed, as one commentator has helpfully observed:

Mythology teaches us that the king who rules over our innermost court sets the tone and character for that court and thus our whole life. If the king is well, we are well; if things are right inside, they will go well outside. With the wounded Fisher King presiding at the inner court of modern western humanity we can expect much outward suffering and alienation. And so it is: the kingdom is not flourishing; the crops are poor; maidens are bereaved; children are orphaned. This eloquent language expresses how a wounded archetypal underpinning manifests itself in problems in our external lives. ⁱ

In this respect, it is also not for nothing that the Fisher King legend has also been regarded as illuminative not only of the human condition as a whole, but of crises of masculinity in particular. ⁱⁱ

What ultimately heals the Fisher King? In many renderings of the legend, significantly it is the naive fool, or the jester if you will, that is Parsifal. For what Parsifal represents is not truly foolishness but the playful renewing energy within us all. Interpreters on the Fisher King would therefore suggest that, to find a cure, a human being must look to the seemingly foolish, innocent, even adolescent part of ourselves.

It is, it seems, only the inner fool who can touch our Fisher King wounds. To become more whole we therefore have to invite more of this part of ourselves into our being: the parts we probably left behind in childhood as we became 'serious' people. In the legends, Parsifal is a separate character to the Fisher King, and in the same way, we have to allow something 'new' to emerge or re-emerge within us. Indeed, it is Parsifal's innocence that is the source of their fearlessness.

Thirdly, therefore, our Gospel story calls us to share in how healing and flourishing can take place for kingdoms, or realms, as well as for individuals: through the gifts of the greatest spiritual jester of all, Jesus; through the One who shares the divine laughter and the invitation to share in the true realm, of God's love...

So what then do we see as the gifts of the jester, the gifts of Christ, the gifts of God, in the face of the human condition, the wounds of the Fisher King, and the Pilates of this world? Perhaps different key elements from our stories today come to mind. Above all however, there is the gift of not fearing. For so much of our world runs on fear. We are afraid of all kinds of things, inside and outside of ourselves, and, sadly, many political, religious and other leaders act out of, and feed on, this.

Of course, we are also called by God to be shrewd about genuine threats to our well-being. Yet even rational fears can easily get out of hand. Instead, faced by power, Jesus, like the jester, not only teaches, but shows us, another way to live: not out of fear but out of love. For this, the power of the Cross, is the ultimate foundation of our lives. This is the true power we can therefore draw upon, just as the jester did in our story. We do not have to allow ourselves to be held back or consumed by our fears.

In other words, even when our world, the realm of this world, seems to be crumbling around us, let us remember and rest in the love of God which is in and around us. Like the jester in the story, we are then free to respond creatively in the face of change and challenge.

Christ may not be all in all in this world, yet Christ is also not wholly absent but already partly present among us. As such, God's realm is both now and yet to come.

Jesus thus invites us not to be conformed to the kingdoms of this world but rather to be transformed by God's realm: the realm of the jester, who turns things upside down and calls us to the joys of simplicity and trust.

In the rightly much quoted words of the great Welsh Anglican poet-priest R.S.Thomas, of this realm, or kingdom:

*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 will purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.*

Amen.

ⁱ <https://leaderbrotherson.substack.com/p/the-myth-of-the-wounded-king-and>

ⁱⁱ See further, for example, Johnson, R.A. (2009). *He: Understanding Masculine Psychology*.