

MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 21 NOVEMBER 2021

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This material was prepared for the St Stephen's Tuesday congregation (on Zoom for the last time), and for face-to-face worship at Strathfield-Homebush. Today we celebrate the Feast Day of Christ the King, a more than apt way to conclude the ecclesiastical year. Next Sunday begins the season of Advent!

1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Jesus Christ, Son of God, Risen One,
We salute you as King of Kings and Lord of Lords.
In you are salvation and grace,
in you truth and life.
In you alone is the true hope of the world.
Jesus our Lord,
you have given your very self for us;
you have endured the worst that we could throw at you,
indeed submitted yourself to the cruelty of the cross,
succumbed to death,
descended into the grave,
for us, who were your pursuers and your persecutors.
And yet, Jesus our King,
you invite us to your table as family,
you call us sisters and brothers,
for your only impulse is grace,
and your only instinct is love.
Jesus we bow before you and declare our allegiance to your kingdom,
for you have saved us, you have spoken truth to us,
and you have led us to new life.
We worship and adore and love you.

For we know our unworthiness.
We hold firm to our citizenship of this world,
and we are fickle in our loyalty to you and your Kingdom.
We can recite the two great statutes of the Kingdom,
that we should love God with all our being,
and our neighbour as ourselves;
yet we so often pay no more than lip service to these great injunctions.
We want a foot in both camps,
unprepared to commit to our true home in your Kingdom.
Forgive us our half-hearted faith, our ambivalence and our short-lived resolve.
Grant us hearts that are filled with faith,
the courage to go where you call us to be,
and the steadfastness to persevere in the way of the truth
and to stare down the temptations and distractions of this world.
For you are our saviour and our King,
and we come to you at your seat of mercy to seek your forgiveness.
Amen

2 **Declaration of Forgiveness.**

The apostle Paul proclaimed the gospel of salvation wherever he went. He wrote these words to the church in Corinth:

Now I should remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day.....

That is the good news that has resonated down through the centuries, that in the risen Jesus, our sins are forgiven. Thanks be to God.

3 **Bible Readings –**
John 18:33-38

4 **Sermon:** See below

5 **Prayers of the People and Lord's Prayer**

(Tuesday was International Day for Tolerance. Our world has become very polarised around so many issues, and we have seen a disturbing rise in intolerant behaviour. With intolerance goes the inability to see another's point of view, and so the inability to compromise – both foundational to a healthy society. So this international day is a timely reminder to pray for some of the deep-seated problems of our world.)

Our Father,

We bring before you our concern for some of the trends that are driving our world in troubling directions.

Around us,

we see more and more people entrenching themselves into fixed positions, convincing themselves and those who join them that only they can know what is true, and only they can discern what is right.

We see it in politics, where so much of the centre ground has evaporated, but we see it also in major issues that face us all –

the pandemic and vaccination; our deteriorating climate; our international relations.

Father we acknowledge that it is good to stand for what you believe in, but it is not good to stop listening to those who disagree with you;

it is not good to baptise yourself in your own rectitude

to the point of demonising anyone and everyone with a different view.

Such immutable positions lead to intolerance, to conflict and often to violence.

They exclude any hope of compromise, branding it as weakness or selling out.

Father, we pray for a more tolerant world, a world

in which we relearn the skill and the importance of listening to each other,

of truly trying to understand each other's point of view,

of genuinely seeking to stand in each other's shoes.

We pray that our politics, and those of so many other nations,

rediscover the art of compromise and finding the shared middle ground.

We pray for all the issues that divide and polarise us into warring camps,

that we might learn to hear what others are saying,

to appreciate their fears and aspirations,

and not simply to cast them as evil or driven by perverse motives.

Particularly now,

we ask that we might do better in tackling the challenge of climate change.

We have seen the COP26 talks achieve far too little
as nations retreated to their fixed corners of entrenched self-interest;
this in the face of what is literally an existential threat to the world as we know it!
Grant us the wisdom to hear each other and understand each other,
to compromise and move ahead together for the sake of the whole world.
And grant us the same consensus in the face of the continuing pandemic.
In Western nations,
we have seen polarisation and violence around public health measures
and vaccination;
while as a world,
we have selfishly divided ourselves into the haves and the have-nots,
those privileged to be vaccinated and beginning to emerge from the darkness,
and those without the resources to tackle Covid to anything like that degree.
As the United Nations reminds us of the importance of tolerance,
may we take to heart our need to understand and live with each other,
to be able to compromise, to work together and to move forward together,
that we might make meaningful progress towards a better future for all,
while we build a more civil and loving society.

And now Father we conclude with the prayer that Jesus gave us,

Our father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come;
Your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen

6 **Blessing and Dismissal**

The grace of our King of Kings and Lord of Lords,
the love of God,
and the companionship of the Holy Spirit
be with us now,
and abide with us evermore.
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Amen

SERMON

The Queen's enforced absence from COP26, and short hospitalisation, served as a reminder of the inevitability that the only monarch most of us have ever known will one day die. We have had a reigning Queen since 1952, some sixty-nine years, so, for most of us, the idea of having a King seems quite alien. We kind of know what having a Queen means – because of Her Majesty's great example – but the word “King” doesn't sit so familiarly with us. What will having a King feel like?

The trouble is that we have so many different ideas about what a king is. Probably one of the most powerful is entirely fictional! Our first brush with kings probably came in fairy tales and folk lore. Those kings fell into two simple categories – they were either *good* kings, or they were *bad* kings. Our much loved stories of Robin Hood always had “good King Richard” in the background. (Actually there was little to commend Richard I, the so-called “Lion-Heart”, but never let the facts get in the way of a good story.) Kings in our storybooks were wealthy, powerful figures whom everyone obeyed, for better or for worse.

Clearly, in a constitutional monarchy, the eventual King Charles III won't be like that! So we're a little confused about just what having a king *will* be like.

The confusion was no less real in Jesus' day. Our reading today is from John's gospel, and it involves the encounter between the Roman Governor, Pilate, and Jesus, following Jesus' arrest. “Are you the King of the Jews?” Pilate asks Jesus. What did *he* mean by that? The answer may seem obvious, but not so. The Romans had ridded themselves of their kings centuries before. Traditionally the last king had been Tarquinius Superbus – Tarquin the Arrogant – and his name tells you why he met his unhappy end. Those who ousted him were celebrated as liberators for centuries afterwards, and the very idea of kingship was anathema to the Romans. It was a standard political jibe to accuse your opponent of aspiring to be “king”. When their empire had expanded into the eastern Mediterranean, which was largely ruled by the Hellenistic kings of Greek descent, the Romans regarded themselves as liberators of oppressed peoples. They were the nice Romans come to free captive peoples from the clutches of evil kings.

Of course, by the time Jesus and Pilate spoke, Rome had what *we* call an Emperor, but no Roman – not Pilate, and certainly not the Emperor Tiberius himself – would even have *dreamt* of such a title, let alone the even more obnoxious title of “king”. The Roman state remained the *res publica* – that is, the commonwealth – and the man who dominated its government was simply the *princeps*, the leading citizen. Despite the great power of the *princeps*, it would never have crossed Pilate's mind that the *princeps* was any kind of king, or that he aspired to be a king. So for Pilate, in this conversation with Jesus, a “king” was someone alien and undesirable. And potentially a dangerous political threat to Roman rule who must be opposed.

On the Jews' side, things were not so clear cut. There was a strong positive tradition about King David, to the point that he had been mythologised; and the prophets had foretold that one day a descendent of King David would rule again, bringing righteousness and justice and liberation to his people. A Davidic king was a very positive concept. More recently though, following the revolt of the Maccabees in the 2nd century BC, the Hasmonaeans kings – who were not of David's line – had brought a century of independence to Judah, but not with a completely clean slate. They had tried to dominate the High Priesthood, which offended conservative Jews. In them, kingship had come with very mixed blessings. And then had come Herod the Great, related by marriage to the Hasmonaeans, but regarded by many Jews as a usurper. He ruled under the overall authority of the Romans – a “client king”. Herod was a great builder, responsible, among other things, for the magnificent Temple. But he was also utterly ruthless, both within his own family to preserve his position, and to the Jewish people, whom he taxed heavily and ruled oppressively. In fact the first

Roman *princeps*, Augustus, is said to have remarked, “It would be better to be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son”! Herod was loathed by a great many Jews, and there is no doubt that he had sullied the very idea of kingship for the Jews. In Jesus’ day, three of Herod’s sons ruled various parts of Judaea, though not all with the title of “King”. Like their father, they were less than popular figures.

Pilate’s question, then, to Jesus, “Are you king of the Jews?”, was one charged with unspoken connotations. Was he discharging his responsibility to ensure security, determining if this accused man lay claim to some authority that might threaten the peace and Roman sovereignty? Was he contemptuous of Jesus, playing the role of Roman protector of their subjects’ liberty? Or was he just plain curious about the charges that had been laid against Jesus by the Jewish authorities?

Jesus’ response will have flummoxed him completely.

My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.

The Romans dealt in *realpolitik*; kingdoms not of this world belonged to the realm of philosophers. Pilate’s response was like a cross-examining barrister pouncing on a slip by a witness:

So you are a king?

It’s already obvious that Pilate and Jesus are talking about completely different things. The gulf between them is clear from Jesus’ response,

You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.

What sort of king is this? Certainly not the stereotypical tyrant that the Romans had in mind. Certainly not a Herod, loathed by his own people as a usurper. And not even a king in the tradition of David who, despite his mythologisation, had nevertheless been a warrior and potentate. *This* king is not about power, but about testifying to the truth.

Of course, we have no idea if this conversation ever took place, or whether it’s a device used by the writer of John’s gospel to make an important statement about the identity of Jesus. This Sunday is the last day of the ecclesiastical year. In 1925, Pope Pius XI instituted the Feast Day of Christ the King on the final Sunday of the Church year. Those who indiscriminately eschew anything emanating from the Roman Catholic Church naturally do not celebrate this day. In the Uniting Church, there has been a more considered accommodation of some of the traditions and rites of the Church. We are free to mark the Feast Day of Christ the King, and might choose to do so to share in that important statement about the identity of Jesus our Lord.

The Church has always acknowledged Jesus Christ as a King. In Revelation, the glorified, risen Christ is referred to as “King of Kings and Lord of Lords, a phrase wonderfully picked up in Handel’s masterpiece *The Messiah*. We still sing Wesley’s hymn, “Rejoice the Lord is King”, but the notion of Jesus’ kingship figured in a number of his hymns. *We* have no need to ask of Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” We know and own and proclaim the kingship of our saviour.

But we make a mistake if we dress Jesus up in the trappings of earthly kings, if we let the imagery of Revelation take hold of our imagination and ensconce Jesus on a golden throne, dressed in splendour and lording it over his realm. We need to hear those words of Jesus once again,

My kingdom is not from this world. ... my kingdom is not from here. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.

Human beings have always looked in the wrong places for happiness and fulfilment and satisfaction. Our instinct is to associate these things with power and wealth. Our Cinderellas only live happily ever after when they've married their wealthy Prince Charming; and we invest our own lives in the accumulation of wealth and security in the determined belief that these things will make us happy and fulfilled.

But the kingdom of Jesus is not like that. The truth that Jesus reveals to us is quite different. The Kingdom of Jesus is built on love and generosity, on selflessness and sacrifice – firstly on the mighty foundational act of Jesus' own sacrifice on the cross; but ever after on the two central laws of the Kingdom,

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and

Love your neighbour as yourself.

In the Kingdom of Jesus, *the last will be first, and the first will be last*. In the Kingdom of Jesus, citizens turn the other cheek, for they love their enemies and forgive their brother, not seven times, but seventy times seven times. In the Kingdom of Jesus it is better to give than to receive. In the Kingdom of Jesus citizens store up their riches in heaven, for where their riches are, there too is their heart.

We are citizens, you and I, of that wondrous Kingdom, for we have heard and believed the truth to which Jesus testifies. We are mere sojourners here. We may hold citizenship of human kingdoms and nations, but we are dual citizens, and our greater allegiance is to the Kingdom of Jesus. We gratefully enjoy the privileges of that citizenship – grace and forgiveness, love and fellowship. What is more, we may dine at the table of the King himself; and the King himself calls us his sisters and brothers, and introduces us to his Father as *our* Father too. Jesus' Kingdom is a Kingdom like no other. It is the realm in which the words of the prophet are finally fulfilled, where swords are beaten into the ploughshares, and spears into pruning hooks, and no more do they train for war. This is the Kingdom that has come upon us in Jesus Christ; this is the Kingdom of which we are the grateful citizens; this is the Kingdom whose truth stares down the mightiest of human nations and kings. This is the Kingdom which, every time we pray the Lord's prayer, we pray will descend upon the whole earth to bring healing and renewal.

The Festival of Christ the King is our national day. We give thanks and praise and honour to our true sovereign Lord, to the Lord of Lords and King of Kings, to Jesus Christ, King forever of this Kingdom of Truth.

Amen