

Pilgrim UCA, 25.11.2018

John 18:33-38, Mark 10: 13-16

“Baptism, and the Way of Christ”



It might seem that the two Gospel readings we read today are strange ones to sit side by side. And in some ways they are. It might seem that to read the story of Jesus on trial for his life is a little strange. Also true. Strange... and deliberate.

I dare to hope that my witness this morning makes my putting these readings together a reasonable thing to do. I think both address what we've done today in N's baptism. ("N" stands for "Name")

In the Christian year, this day is called "Reign of Christ" Sunday.

It used to be called "*The Feast of Christ the King*". In each case, the idea is to assert the sovereignty of Christ over the powers of earth. As we heard in the reading from John's gospel, the language of 'king' was being used very early in the life of the church – but not as early as Jesus himself. John's gospel was written anywhere up to 70 years after Jesus' death. The account of his trial before Pilate, and the conversation described here, is not based on 'court records', but on decades' worth of stories told and retold among the early Christian community, finally put into written form in John's Gospel.

That doesn't make it inaccurate – stories were generally passed on pretty faithfully – but it DOES influence the language used. We know that by the time of John's Gospel, the language of kingship and imperial authority were being used about Jesus.

We know that it's in some of the writings of the great Christian teacher evangelist Paul – maybe 40 years before John – but there it's mostly placing Jesus in OPPOSITION to the Roman Empire, the great power of the day.

In effect, Paul and the earlier Christians were saying "*Christ is king, not Caesar*".

Centuries later, when the Church became part of 'the system' and its power structures, the language started to change in meaning, But in the time of John's Gospel that was still way off in the future.

And that is the setting for this conversation between Jesus and Pontius Pilate, the Roman Empire's man in Jerusalem.

It's a strange conversation because Pilate can't imagine ANY sort of power that isn't wrapped up in the type of power that Rome has: the power of force, of violence, of politics, and 'the system' - the way things are.

So he interprets or understands Jesus in that kind of understanding about power and authority, which makes him a threat to Rome, and to Pilate himself!

When Jesus says "*my 'kingdom' is not of this world*", he's not just suggesting that it's somewhere else – though it may be – but mostly that it's not the same TYPE of kingdom as the ones that hold power over others. It's not about control and force, it's not about survival of the toughest, or "*my army's bigger than your army*".

In fact it looks more like this story from Mark's gospel we heard earlier:

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

It's a kingdom – or better, a way of being in the world - that values all people; not simply the strong, the powerbrokers, and the rich. (in our day, we might also add “the celebrities”).

To Pilate, I'm sure that looked like a sooky lala kind of kingdom, just as it does to many today. But let's not mistake Jesus' care and compassion for weakness. He was indignant with any who tried to stop the children coming to him, and challenged them.

We know that he was more than willing to stand up for others, and in his trial before Pilate he never caved in to the power of Rome.

Jesus was born into a peasant family, in a backwater village on the edge of a dominant empire that ruled by force: talk about “*From little things, big things grow*”!

He lived with a different vision of how the world could be: a vision with different priorities and values. A vision that brought him into conflict with the political and religious ‘empires’ of his day: a vision that cost him his life!

But a vision that caught on! A vision which has inspired countless generations.

A vision into which we've baptised N today.

N is loved. In baptism, we've celebrated that her life is a gift of GOD, not only to her mum, dad, and big brother, not only to her extended family and friends but to all of us, and the world

The world is richer because N is part of it. We don't know her future, but today we have made her part of a community that does its best to follow the way of Jesus, with open hands, hearts, and minds. This is our heart for life! And may it be N's too!

Blessings,

Rod Peppiatt

