

Christ the King. 25 November 2018. Citizens of the Kingdom

When driving west along the Eyre Highway, along the lonely and sparsely populated stretch of country between the WA/SA border and the mining town of Norseman, even if you glance to your right about 150kms inside WA you will probably miss seeing something interesting.

Nestled in the hills of the escarpment, a little way off the road, there is a palace. Not a palace as you might imagine though. I suppose when a house is the main residence of a kingdom it has to be a palace! In those hills there exists one of several independent kingdoms which can be found in Australia, all (as far as I know) in WA. The palace is a ramshackle building, put together from driftwood and bits and pieces of material scrounged by the king.

Let's keep his anonymity and call him King Bruce. At least one of the other independent kingdoms over there has a formal structure, they have issued postage stamps and even have ambassadors in Australia and overseas. Bruce's kingdom is a bit simpler. It is just him. There, alone, in his palace in the hills. At least it was last time I was there. The Kingdom of Bruce was part of one of my former parishes and I visited him a couple of times.

A conversation with Bruce has some connections to Pilate's conversation with Jesus in today's gospel (John 18:33-37). There was Bruce, looking a bit rough. From what I remember his kingdom must also have been in drought because I don't think he had showered or bathed in a while! The royal robes he was wearing had seen better days too, many years before! The royal shorts and t-shirt were very holey. But he was an interesting bloke in an interesting situation.

Jesus, before Pilate, may not have been smelly (though bathing was also not a big thing in the ancient world) but the treatment he had already received may have made him look a bit shabby. Worse was to come. A lot worse. But you can't blame Pilate for asking the question of this simply dressed prisoner "So YOU are a King?"

The accusation of being, or calling himself, a king was a political ploy to make the supposed crimes of Jesus something that Pilate could deal with. Setting himself up as a rival to Caesar, claiming political power was something which stepped firmly on the toes of the Roman occupying force in Palestine.

Religious disputes meant nothing to the Romans. They ruled over a vast area across which religion was expressed in a myriad of ways. It was political dispute and claim which would get a response. Some Caesars, as we know from the disputes in the book of Acts and the letters of Paul, did try to insist that they themselves were gods and people needed to make offerings to them, but this was really political control cloaked in religious ritual.

Claiming to be a king, though, was to assert authority which challenged the power and right of Rome. What do you think Pilate would have made of this conversation? I expect that it was more confusing than enlightening. More disturbing than clarifying. Pilate pushes Jesus to admit that he is a king BUT not in any way that Pilate was expecting or can comprehend.

Stained glass windows, sculptures, paintings and a vast array of images have picked up on Jesus as the King, but they have almost always drawn on other images of what kings in the world look like. People in rich fancy robes, wearing crowns, standing or sitting in high places looking down at their subjects. These images of how earthly kings look and act have been transferred to the images and even expectations about Jesus.

But is that what the Kingdom and Kingship of Jesus is really about?

I think of King Bruce, sitting (perhaps) still in his lonely ramshackle palace in the dusty hills near the edge of the Nullarbor Plain and I wonder whether you can be a king if you are the only one in your kingdom.

I have my passport which declares me to be a citizen of Australia. That gives me certain rights and certain responsibilities. It is a statement of connection. It says where I belong. Until or unless we become a Republic my passport, and yours also, requests assistance for me, as a citizen of Australia, drawing on and connected to the authority and position of Queen Elizabeth II. Being connected to a royal ruler is part of the rights and responsibilities which come with being a citizen of this country at the moment.

As far as I know King Bruce has only one citizen apart from himself. One of his mates who lived in Norseman joined up to support him. Prince Leonard of the Hutt River Province has a handful of citizens. He is the guy who issued stamps and has ambassadors. What about King Jesus? He has us.

My passport declares that I am a citizen of Australia. More importantly my baptism certificate declares that I am a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom which Jesus was sharing and which Pilate couldn't understand, was not about places or palaces, or titles, or fine robes, or titles or any particular location. It was, and is, about community. When we celebrate Christ the King the focus is not just on him. It is on us. What does it mean to be someone who shows that we are connected to Christ the King?

As a citizen of Australia there are certain things that people might expect of me. There are, I hope still, certain values which we can reassert as Australian values, despite the way that meanness and prejudice and narrow views have eroded those values. I am not at all sure what it would mean to be a member of the Kingdom of Bruce. I don't know what he stands for.

But we do know what it means to be a member of the Kingdom of God, to be a citizen showing allegiance to Christ the King. It means to be a person who is faithful, compassionate, forgiving, generous, trusting and trustworthy, open, passionate for justice and support for those who are vulnerable.

As we celebrate the feast of Christ the King what we are declaring is that we will strive to live according to those values, to honour our citizenship, to live out what it means to be a baptised member of the church.

I wouldn't know a member of Bruce's kingdom if I met them. I hope that WE will be recognisable though. Not only by the outward symbols of citizenship we might wear, crosses, fish, other kinds of badges. I hope that the recognition will come when people look at how we live, listen to our words, see how we treat other people ... and through that they will know where our allegiance truly rests.

Amen.

Paul Mitchell