

So You Are a King? (John 18: 33-37)*Christ the King*

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This is the story of a set up. Jesus has been arrested by the Jerusalem establishment. He's been questioned by Annas and Caiaphas, high priests that year, and they've taken him to the headquarters of the Roman governor, Pilate. The reason they give for handing him over is vague, to say the least. Pilate asks, 'What accusation do you bring against this man?' and they respond, 'If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you'. Pilate isn't convinced this is an issue for him – 'Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law'. But they reply, 'We are not permitted to put anyone to death'. And here they get to the nub of the matter. They want him killed, but with the veneer of legality, respectability. The lynching is to be disguised.

'Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?"' At first glance, this is a non-sequitur. There's no indication from the gospel text that this is how Jesus has been described or accused up to this point. And Jesus picks up the fact that it's an odd question for Pilate to ask: 'Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?' In other words, are you speaking in your own voice? Are you truly seeking to know the truth? Or are you just a patsy for the machinations of my accusers? Pilate gets defensive. How am I supposed to know what you wogs get up to? Do I look like I'm interested in your pathetic internal feuds? 'I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?'

Strikingly, dangerously Jesus riffs off the imputation of kingship. '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'. Note the three-fold repetition – 'my kingdom, my kingdom, my kingdom'. Pilate is a servant of empire. He's focused on the interests and claims to exclusive dominion of the Roman emperor. Naturally he zeroes in on this phrase. 'So you are a king?', Pilate asked him. But for Jesus, this isn't the main issue at all. 'You say that I am a king'. If you want to designate me this way, go ahead. But don't misunderstand what it means. For the nature of my 'rule', Jesus says, is not on the same plane as that of earthly kings. My kingdom is not 'from this world' and you should be able to recognise this by the fact that I am not fighting and my followers are not fighting to gain or to defend it. In other words, Jesus is not in rivalry with anyone, he's not competing for territory and influence within the space of the world. 'My kingdom is not from here'. In what sense, then, is he a king?

In Christian iconography, the kingship of Jesus is customarily portrayed by the image of the Pantocrator – 'ruler of all'. These icons, at least by the end of the Middle Ages, almost invariably designate Christ with the Greek words '*ho on*', 'the existing one', 'he who is'.¹ And this gives us a clue. The rule of Christ is the dominion of reality, of truth, and the power he has, the authority that belongs to him is simply the authority of reality itself. Jesus says, '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'. We can deny reality, we can fail to recognise it when it's in front of us. 'What is truth?' Pilate asks. But reality doesn't have to fight to secure its place or convince us of itself. It simply 'is' and we either get with the program, or we don't. Sooner or later, the consequences of denying or falsifying reality become, as with climate change, apparent.

We've been exploring over the last three weeks the theme of the 'un-religion' of Jesus – and here (in a sense) is the ultimate deconstruction of Christianity as a

¹ Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (Melbourne: John Garratt Publishing, 2003), p.69.

‘religion’. Jesus isn’t offering one system of thought, one claim to human attention among others – he claims to be putting us in touch with reality itself. Yet to say this seems fraught with moral and theological risk. He might be disclaiming ‘lordship’ in any worldly sense, refusing to exercise power over anyone, to coerce or tyrannise or secure his own interests. The Son of Man came to serve and not to be served, Jesus says. Yet, on the account I’ve just given, the unthreatenedness of his way of being derives from what seems a much more dangerously over-weening claim – Jesus has no need to compete for place *in* the world because he claims to be rooted in the heart of being itself, fully expressive of it. He *is* the fullness of reality, he acts out of the act of God.² *I am* the truth, the way and the life, he cries. But this just seems daft. Given the myriad of life-forms on this planet, the vast immensity of the cosmos, what can it possibly mean to see in this one human being the truth of all that is? And in our pluralist, multi-faith context, isn’t any such identification of Jesus with truth itself an assertion of unwarranted cultural hegemony – a blatant grab for territory?

Well, I’ll come to these questions. But first let me say a little about what might lead anyone to take seriously the claim that Jesus’ life embodies and so testifies to the truth of life itself. According to the New Testament, this claim is initially plausible because of what Jesus did and said and made possible for those around him – his unusual authority and freedom to be, his power to heal and awaken understanding, his capacity to reveal to people the truth of themselves and so imagine their lives afresh. The sense that he embodied the divine life was then confirmed by his resurrection from the dead, and the experience of the apostolic community of his continued presence and transforming power among them. For our purposes, though, what mattered most in all this was the radically new *content* Jesus’ life, death and resurrection gives to our understanding of the *nature* of ultimate reality. Because what Jesus revealed, when he allowed himself to be handed over even to death, when he came vulnerably among us and gave himself up for our sake, is that the

² Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light*, p.70

being of God is self-giving, self-forgetting, active love. God is 'for us', God's life is essentially generative of life.

And it's this, I think, that suggests how Jesus comes to be understood as the one who embodies the basic truth of life itself, Pantocrator, 'ruler of all'. For one thing, Jesus' action of self-giving, self-forgetting love can be seen as the underlying dynamic and source of all life. The Christian understanding of creation is that the being of all things is possible only because God wills that what is not God should be. God makes space for creation by not being everything – 'let there be ...'. Existence itself, writes Rowan Williams, 'is rooted in the divine "humility", the divine self-forgetting'.³ It's shape, in other words, is 'Christic'.

This in turn makes clearer how Jesus might be seen as the truth of our lives too – if reality is sourced in the humble, self-dispossessing, non-grasping action of God, then our alignment with that reality will mean becoming 'like him'. That will be where our fullest life lies – and we know that this is in fact true from experience. We know we're more fully ourselves and more free to be when we're not grasping at being, when we're not dominating or controlling others. And I think that's just what confessing Jesus as Lord means – it's not about joining his team so we can fight all the other teams. It's about recognising the basic dynamic of life, and letting ourselves be aligned to it by being like him, participating in his willing self-dispossession so as to become fully alive, real and true.

All this needs more fleshing out, I know. But I hope I've said enough to make clear that if ever we proclaim the 'lordship' of Christ to oppress or demean others, in the service of our own interests or our own religiosity, then we've entirely missed the point. Last week, our former Prime Minister Tony Abbott claimed that given the significance of Christianity in our cultural heritage, Christian prayers should be offered at public events alongside any acknowledgement of country. I have no

³ Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light*, p.72.

problem with the public saying of prayers, if they issue from a transforming relationship to the living one. But, at least as it was reported, Abbott's suggestion was connected to his militant defence of so-called 'Western civilisation' against its supposed erosion by the twin forces of political correctness and Islam. That's a prime example, to my mind, of how not to proclaim Christ as king. Any imperial claim made in the name of Jesus must, by definition, be false, for his kingdom is 'not of this world'. He is not in competition for space, he is not in rivalry with anyone. His rule is sourced in the authority of reality itself. And we recognise that reality, we participate in it and are transformed by it – not by wielding our religion ideologically – but by being simply, generously, willingly handed over in faith and love, and so humble, self-forgetful and joyfully transfigured for the love of the world. Only then may we truly say, *Let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice; let them say among the nations, 'The Lord reigns!'* (1 Chron. 16:31)