

Regime Change (John 18. 33-38)

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‘So you are a King?’ (John 18.37). When Jesus burst onto the public stage, according to Mark’s gospel, the first thing he did was to proclaim that ‘the kingdom of God has come near’ (Mark 1.15). These words are described as ‘*evangelion*’ or ‘good news’ and, in the ancient world, an *evangelion* was ‘an important public announcement’. Rowan Williams suggests it’s comparable to ‘a press release from Buckingham Palace or [Parliament House] announcing a significant event of public interest’. News of a royal birth or marriage, for example, of a victory in battle or the ascension of a new monarch. An *evangelion* is ‘a message about something that alters the climate in which people live, changing the politics and the possibilities; it transforms the landscape of social life’.¹ So when the gospel describes its contents as an *evangelion* it signals ‘this was a book about “regime change”; someone’s new reign had been inaugurated’.

At the end of Jesus’ story, this language of kingship recurs. But this time it seems less an *evangelion* and more painfully ironic, for it issues from his enemies as both accusation and mockery. On the one hand, the charge that he’s claimed to be a king is purportedly the reason Jesus is condemned to death; his accusers in John’s gospel testify that he set himself ‘against the Emperor’ (John 19.12). On the other hand, it’s a claim that seems ever more palpably ridiculous. Who does this Galilean upstart think he is, with his ragtag band of followers, purporting to be someone, to represent or inaugurate some new centre of power? So they give him a crown, but it’s of thorns; they give him mocking homage – ‘Hail, King of the Jews’ – while striking him on the face; they inscribe a kingly title above his head, but it’s on the instrument of his torture and death. From the perspective of those in power, the end of Jesus’

¹ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark* (London: SPCK, 2014), p.6.

story constitutes the decisive failure of his kingly pretensions, the comprehensive defeat of his claim to inaugurate a new reign. Yet from the perspective of the gospels, the irony of this narrative runs deeper still. With extraordinary literary art, they imply that without knowing what they do, in the very act of refusing him acknowledgement, the rulers of this world inadvertently testify to him: 'So you are a king?', says Pilate. 'You say that I am a king', Jesus answered.

Well, most of you will be familiar with the themes here. Jesus has entered into a world of imperial overlords and well-connected officials who use their power habitually to seize the world's goods, control information and decide the fate of peoples. Their rule is undergirded by physical, material and social violence or the threat of it. Into this world, he comes to proclaim that there is in fact an alternate power at work in our midst. This alternate power constitutes a radical challenge to the usual exercise of rule in this world, but it's not in rivalry at the same level.

If my kingdom were from this world, Jesus tells Pilate, 'my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over'. No – this alternate way of power is 'not from here'. It does not need to defend itself because it simply is. The kingdom of God is a vast creative goodness, a mercy and love that cannot ultimately be overthrown, for it is the nature of things, the truth of life. Jesus comes to make it more fully known and to create trust in it. 'For this I was born, and for this I come into the world, to testify to the truth'. From beginning to end, then, Jesus proclaims the availability of a new climate for living, the possibility of changing the regime under which we live. He seeks to transform our sense of where power really lies and thus to give us a whole new vision of being and belonging, the resource from which to live a very different kind of life.

But this is where it starts to get tricky. Because how exactly does this so-called 'kingdom of God' relate to the world we inhabit and the powers that rule it? What does it mean to belong to this truth, to live in accordance with it in the here and now? It's often not easy to know and the history of Christianity is littered with what I take to be false visions. At one extreme, there are Christian communities that, in the

name of the reign of Christ, behave exactly like the kingdoms of this world. The mediaeval church, for example, accruing territories, armies and ecclesiastical hierarchies in direct rivalry for worldly wealth and sway with secular kings and emperors. Or contemporary Christian nationalists and right-wing Christian lobbyists who, again in the name of Christ's kingship, seek ever increasing influence and power in secular politics, acting to impose their social vision by means (if necessary) of violence – material, social, even physical violence – as if the power of God were essentially no different than the state's power to coerce.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are Christian communities that cede responsibility to or for the public sphere altogether. Avoiding direct rivalry with the powers of this world, they retreat into other-worldly enclaves of private so-called 'spirituality', preparing the souls of the faithful for heaven and cordoning off 'the Kingdom of God into a space outside of time'.² But this profoundly constrains the capacity of the church to confront injustice and abuse; it's a betrayal of the Christ who said he came to liberate the oppressed and set the captives free.

In between these extremes, there are large and complex questions about the proper relationship between church and politics, between spiritual practice and social action. Our world is such that these questions are increasingly pressing. How, for example, are we called to live as a community of reconciliation in a profoundly polarised world? How may we speak and act in public for particular causes without entrenching hostility between groups or making some feel judged and unwelcome? How is power rightly exercised within and by Christian communities for the love of all? I said they were large and complex questions!! And of course, they can't be answered in the abstract. But I think we can pick up some clues by attending to what's gone wrong in what I've called false visions of the kingdom of God.

Because what these have in common, it seems to me, is a kind of impatience, an unwillingness to be with, to suffer and to 'stay with the trouble'. James Alison speaks of authentic transformation, the coming of God's kingdom, as the necessarily

² William T. Cavanagh, *Torture and Eucharist* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), p.206.

slow forging of a counter-narrative in the midst of a violent world.³ And it's this slow work of authentic transformation that's being avoided when you seek violently to impose your vision of the good from outside and when you withdraw from the fray altogether. But look at Jesus before Pilate. He stays with the trouble. He's come near – neither betraying the reality of that vast creative goodness, the 'kingdom of God', in which his whole life is sourced, nor abandoning this world to the futile machinations of those who would usurp its goods for themselves and diminish the life of all. He's embodying the risk and vulnerability of involvement.

We are the body of Christ. We too are called to live as witnesses to this vast creative goodness, this alternate power at work in our midst which acts not according to the logic of domination, anxiety and control but of gift and shared life. When two or three are gathered together in Christ's name, this is the reality that's supposed to be becoming visible in the midst of things, testifying that the world can be other than it seems destined to be. *Evangelion*, good news, regime change.

But we all know how fragile and inadequate a witness to this reality we are. And this is why we need to gather, to remember Jesus, to share the Eucharist – Communion. For in this meal, we not only celebrate human fellowship, but we feed on Christ. In his *Confessions*, St Augustine wrote that he heard a voice from on high saying to him: 'I am the food of the fully grown; grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me'. Commenting on this vision, William Cavanaugh wrote: 'The fact that the church is literally changed into Christ is not a cause for triumphalism, however, precisely because our assimilation to the body of Christ means that we then become food for the world, to be broken, given away, and consumed. As Raniero Cantalamessa puts it, "the Eucharist makes the Church by making the Church Eucharist!"'.⁴

My kingdom is not from this world, Jesus said. This is my body, broken for you.

³ James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1996).

⁴ Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, p.232.