

## **The kingship of Christ is an assertion against domination**

*Sermon by Andy Wurm, Christ the King, 25<sup>th</sup> November 2018*

Here we are once again at the end of the church year, and as is often the case when things are winding up, it's a chance for a final statement. In the church then, we say that Christ is king.

As the image of king isn't really appropriate for Jesus, the preferred term for today's celebration might be 'the reign of God', however, it's worth knowing why Jesus was given the title of king.

Calling Jesus king is not to do with him being like a king. There's nothing about him makes him like a king. He's more like the opposite of a king, for example, when he washed his disciples' feet. It was a task considered so degrading, that a master could not order a Jewish slave to perform it. So whatever the early Christians meant by calling Jesus king, it wasn't what was normally meant by the term. And if the early Christians saw themselves as followers of Jesus, who themselves were meant to wash people's feet, they could hardly have been using the term to convey a sense of the kingdom they belonged to being superior to others.

To understand why the early Christians spoke of Jesus as king, we need to go back to ancient Judaism. What we find there, is not a historical development that paved the way for the title of king being given to Jesus, but evidence that kings were thought about rather negatively, so in Jesus' day it was unlikely the term would have been used to convey glory and honour.

It was about 5,000 years ago that kings were invented. They were the rulers of the powerful empires which emerged throughout the world. Those empires were characterised by hierarchical social systems, economic inequality, oppressive politics, patriarchy, ranking, aristocracy, taxation, standing armies, and war.<sup>i</sup> Israel was different though. For a long time they rejected having a king. The reason being that they had had enough of kings during their time of slavery in Egypt. Instead, they opted for more egalitarian economics and politics. They did so especially through their adoption of the Sabbath year and jubilee laws. Under the Sabbath year rules, every seven years, debts were cancelled so that families would not have to sell their land, slaves were to be freed and the land was rested from being farmed. Every fifty years, any property which had been sold to pay debts had to be returned to its ancestral owners. Often these rules were not kept, but the intention was to prevent political and economic inequality developing.

For a long time then, Israel resisted having a king; instead, they had Yahweh who served as their king, although he was never called king, until they did have kings. Eventually over time, pressure grew to have a king. The Israelites wanted to be like other nations. The prophet Samuel tried to warn them what it would mean: an aristocracy, military conscription, a standing army, military-industrial complex to manufacture weapons, taxation to support it all, enslavement or forced enrolment of sons or daughters to serve the king, and seizure of land under royal pretext.<sup>ii</sup> The people were still keen and so they got their kings, and so began years of power politics and all the naughty things kings get up to. Over time the prophets hoped for a return to the time of no king, or at least a descendent of King David who would be nothing like his ancestors.

The source of the kingly title for Jesus then, was not the Jewish kingship of ancient times. It was the Roman empire. The phrase 'kingdom of God' was rare in the Hebrew scriptures, but among those

following Jesus, it was a very important phrase. It was important because Christians wanted to encourage each other to stick to their 'Way', AGAINST the Roman Empire. Calling Christ king and speaking of a kingdom of God was a way of saying no to the Roman Empire (and later to all empires and Domination systems like it). Jesus' message was not just a general message for all times and places. It was preached in a particular context, which was the Roman Empire, a classic case of a political-economic system which existed and flourished through domination. In fact, we can say that following Jesus is really about resisting domination and transforming it.

Jesus wasn't trying to set up an alternative kingdom to the Roman Empire, of which he would be the leader. All he wanted to do was show people they had the power to stand up to the empire and all empires or domination systems. He didn't have an alternative to put in its place, but just showed people how to live in a way that allowed proper relations between people to emerge. It was sort of like: act with love and justice towards other people (and the earth), and God will look after the rest. Jesus showed people how to create the conditions in which life as God intended it to be, could flourish. That's what he called the kingdom of God, or the reign of God. If God reigns, it means there is no dominating power. And it's certainly not a case of one dominating power, i.e. God's power, replacing another one, for God's power is the power to give life, the power to set free and the power love. That means that to see ourselves (i.e. Christians) as superior to others, or to discriminate against others (e.g. deny marriage or ministry roles to some people) is to be functionally atheistic, in other words, to act against the God in whom there is no 'them' and 'us'.

Our worship contains many references to the 'second coming' of Christ, also known as when the kingdom, or the reign of God shall come. Examples include: 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, *Christ will come again*'. And from the Creed: 'we believe in Jesus Christ, who *will come again in glory*, to judge the living and the dead, and we look for the resurrection of the dead, and *the life of the world to come...*' We can see this from two perspectives. One is in terms of the future, and take it to mean that the future has already been unfolded for us in the resurrection of Jesus. The future being, that in time, all creation will be Christ-like, and that future is kind of reaching-back towards us, pulling us forward, beginning to transform the world and us already. The other perspective is to see it as already here. That's what people saw in Jesus: the reign of God was present already and available for all to participate in. The church holds onto both of these perspectives at once.

Where is the reign of God for us to participate in? It's within us and around us. It's within us when we are set free, or set ourselves free, from burdens we have carried from our past. We're in it when our society changes its social practices to be more inclusive. It's between us when we replace competition with cooperation. It's among us when we forgive our enemies. It's within us when we are more satisfied by helping others, than being praised and honoured by them. It's among us when we share power, rather than use it to secure ourselves. We participate in the kingdom of God when we do something as simple as sharing bread and wine in a ritual that is open to all, regardless of age, political persuasion, belief, sexual orientation, gender, level of education and intellectual or physical ability.

The reign of God is what we are invited to participate in and offer for others to share in too. It is also what we are called to be a part of transforming the world into.

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<sup>i</sup> Walter Wink *When the Powers Fall*

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