

**BIBLE READINGS:** Revelation 1:4b-8 John 18:33-37

## **SERMON**

Kings have sort of gone out of fashion in our culture. Democracy and individual rights capture our hearts and minds. I remember reading a report that the King of Sweden couldn't get a parking permit for himself in downtown Stockholm. Even royalists and Royal Family watchers are seen by others as only having an amusing hobby. The Women's Weekly, and the other magazines, while full of pictures of The Queen and the Royal Brood have them cheek to jowl with ads for underarm deodorant and for the removal of that unsightly body hair. The reason Kings and Queens draw our attention is because they are anachronisms - they don't belong in a democratic society. But it wasn't always like that.

Back in the golden days of kingly rule, being a king meant something. It meant divine right, it meant being able and willing to directly affect the lives of his people. A King could take life on a whim and people would not object - at least not publicly. A King had ultimate authority and power.

Today I want to look at Kingly authority particularly - Jesus authority - and I want to make clear from the outset, that his authority and power came from his divine right to rule and be king. Jesus is the one who, in Revelations, is described as "ruler of kings on earth."

Being a King really meant something in Jesus' day. A king was the most powerful human being in society. A king spoke; common people trembled. For nations, the king was the only means of securing order and peace. He was civilisation and domestic security personified in one person.

But that was back then. Here in Australia we debate Monarchy versus Republic and even the monarchists seem embarrassed by the princes and princesses that could eventually rule us. In this environment, can King Jesus mean anything to us? Our view of the Monarchy is marred by pictures of dresses that cover little, of naked princes at windows, marriage breakdowns, fashionable clothes, expensive ski resorts, fathomless art collections, and exclusive schools.

The Dutch have a saying of themselves, whenever someone is put down, "Trix ist Nix - Which means Beatrix (who in 2013 passed on the crown to her son) is also a nobody. Royalty looks as common as the rest of us. We've done to kings and queens what we have done to most sources of authority - everything has been reduced to impotency - made common, everyday. Nothing or no one rules.

But that doesn't help us come to grips with King Jesus. Do we need him to be our King? If we ridicule modern royalty, consider how they ridiculed King Jesus. The setting of the gospel reading is Pilate's trial of Jesus. In the Praetorium, the head of the Roman Occupation Forces in Judea, Pilate asks Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Are you King? He snickered when he asked it. Here was a bedraggled, half-naked Jew before him, back still bloody from a nasty whipping. Some Legionnaires, to mock him, had placed a crown of thorns on his head. Are you King?

Pilate's question to Jesus comes after Annas' interrogation (18:13,19-24). Anna was high priest and related to Caiaphas who John says was "high priest that year" (18:13). One was supposed to be a high priest for life. See what John is doing by saying that Caiaphas was on duty "that year"? It's John's caustic comment on what the Romans had done to Israel's religious leaders - had made them quislings, mere puppets in the hands of the pagans. Annas and Caiaphas are the lackeys of the Romans, who let them be priests that year.

Pilate shows himself to be a weak, indecisive man. (What good is a Roman Governor if he can't keep the Jews in their place?) In contrast, the prisoner Jesus is quiet, assured, and totally in control while everyone else in the drama is running back and forth, filling minor roles.

"Are you the King of the Jews?" asks Pilate, eyebrows raised, a cynical smile on his face. "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" Jesus asks. Are you actually speaking for yourself, or as usual, have others told you what to speak? Pilate responds. "Am I a Jew? Your own people, your own leaders have handed you over." "My kingship is not of your world," says Jesus. "So you really are king?" Jesus answers, "You are the one who keeps saying that I am king."

Pilate thinks that he is in control. He keeps raving about his power, but he has very little. He thinks he is in charge, but obviously this Jew, this battered, whipped Jew, is in charge. When Jesus says that his kingdom is "not of this world," he isn't talking about heaven or some other time. He means now, that his kingdom (unlike that of Pilate or Caiaphas) is not dependent upon or grounded in the methods and means of Caesar's world. Jesus calls the shots, not because he has some certificate from Caesar in Rome, but because he is true royalty.

Now let's go outside, to the courtyard, where another trial is taking place. The trial of Peter, the lead disciple. John devotes as much space to the trial of Peter by the maid in the courtyard as he gives to the trial of Jesus by Pilate in the Praetorium. Jesus is facing the most powerful rulers this world can muster and is calm and firm. Outside, Simon Peter (the disciples, the church) is being questioned by a serving woman and the trial is not going well. Out in the darkness, all the disciples' courage, resolve and determination is slipping. Peter will deny Jesus three times before dawn.

Here is a two level drama. Inside, Jesus, the one who is supposed to be on trial, is the one asking questions, is the one in control. Outside, in the darkness, the followers of Jesus are being questioned by the world and they're falling apart. "I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will scatter" is fulfilled.

"Are you king?" It's an important, fundamental question. It's a question about sovereignty, of authority to rule. Who is in charge?

That's still the fundamental question that we all ask. Who is in charge? The crowd answered, "We have no king but Caesar." And that is still a popular answer. Politics has become our most important way of solving the problems of life, it has become the answer to every human need. We expect politics to make our world secure, give us crime free cities, and drug free children. We have, it seems, no king, no means of stability or security, save Caesar.

Our problem is that our elected officials are no better than the royals. They are just as human as we are! They make mistakes, they were poor achievers at school, they have difficulties in their personal relationships - just like us!

Pilate, powerful dictator Pilate - is revealed to be a rather pitiful, inept man who can't run his own marriage much less Israel. He thinks that he is putting Jesus on trial when, in reality, Jesus has put Pilate and the whole Roman Empire on trial. It's enough, when you see how human and frail our political leaders are, to make you wonder who is really in charge. Because, ultimately, the question who is in charge is revealed to be a deeply religious question, because it makes us reflect on who is in charge of our lives.

When the lights go out, and everything is falling apart, it's good to know who's in charge. While we can rely on the political process to solve some of our problems, we all know that it cannot resolve the deeper needs and problems of life. Sometimes what is happening in our lives is so chaotic, confusing, so out of control, that we need someone to take charge. It is then that we need to know that the one who hung the stars, set the planets in motion, and laid the foundation of the world is there as our ruler.

A Jew stands before us, martyred, scorned, made fun of by the world and its rulers, political and religious. When the lights go out in your life, when things fall apart, and you become unglued, and you feel like Peter on trial, in the darkness, you need to know who sits on the throne. He shall reign for ever and ever, and his kingdom and authority will know no end.