

A sermon by Bishop John Bluck  
on John 18:32f

If you go to Mr Google and look up the title King you get a garden centre followed by an online video game. The most famous king of the last 20 years is the Lion King. How the mighty have fallen.

King is a title that we don't know what to do with the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so we turn it into games and cartoons and romanticise it. Most excessively in the celebrity culture that defines the music and entertainment industry. From Elvis onwards rock stars behave like kings (and queens). There's a whole spate of movies about them at the moment.

There is a lingering fascination about proper royalty of course. Look at the popularity of The Crown, though kings didn't do very well in that series. The only king we saw abdicated and proved to be a self indulgent playboy.

Kings when we do have them are invariably not very nice, unless you live Tonga. Prince Charles is promising to do better and keep his opinions to himself which is a pity because his opinions are always interesting. The kings that are still around are mostly bicycle riding modest European figureheads or slightly sinister and shadowy men like the Saudi Arabia's monarch, with a son who promises to be even more so.

The history of kingship is pretty brutal. For 3000 years, monarchy by inheritance and divine right, overwhelmingly male, was the only form of government in town. All powerful, accountable to no one but God, or a puppet ruler answerable to an emperor, as was the case in Jesus' time. A fellow called Herod who had the moral reputation of Jack the Ripper.

And that was par for the course. Kings ruled by threat of violence, intimidation and fear, by edict and fiat and decree.

So isn't it odd that king is a title that the Christian tradition has bestowed on Jesus, especially when he refused to claim it for himself, even when it was thrust upon him.

This encounter in today's gospel is part of the trials before Jewish and then Roman authorities that led to the crucifixion. Pilate asks Jesus if he is the king of the Jews. Jesus rejects it, but Governor Pilate persists with title, uses it repeatedly, even to the point of writing it out as an inscription that was nailed to the cross as a final mocking insult. A way of ridiculing Jesus. If you're the king why don't you show us and climb down.

The earliest image of the crucifixion was a broken figure with a donkey's head. More ridicule to demean him. The king title is all part of the campaign to discredit Jesus, to add to the disgrace of an imposter who was executed as a criminal.

So why does the title persist? Why do we have a Sunday in honour of Christ the King. Why do so many churches use that title? Why is Jesus so

often depicted in Christian art with a crown and a royal robe, sitting on a throne? Of all the popular images of Jesus, king ranks way above shepherd or teacher or healer or friend.

I said a moment ago that Jesus rejected the title but that's not quite true. He does claim to have kingly authority, he often talks about the kingdom of God. What Jesus does with this title, rather than claim it for himself, is to recast it and rebuild it on new foundations. Instead of on fear and violence and power based on strength and wealth and fame, Jesus talks of a kingdom based on the power of truth telling. My task, he tells Pilate, is to bear witness to the truth. That's where I draw my authority. And it's a greater authority than anything you have.

There is nothing meek or submissive about this encounter. It is a head on collision between the power of violence and wealth, backed by military might, and the power of truth and justice and love.

It's very hard to get rid of royalty and the baggage of power it carries, just as it's hard to de escalate the military world and the fascination with war that it holds. But in the same way you can refocus the military from killing to saving lives with an army for peacekeeping and disaster relief, so too you can turn the idea of kingship from amassing power to giving it away, from enforcing to letting go, from dictating to inviting.

We've just seen a royal tour of a prince and his new wife. Harry won't ever be king and Megan won't ever be queen but they carry this royal X factor none the less. We looked for any signs of self importance or boasting or greed that goes with the territory of great power and prestige, but they were hard to find. What the public seemed to love most about this couple was their easy ability to relate to children and their passion for causes like the Invictus Games and mental health and endangered wildlife. Even royalty can be recycled. When Prince Harry tells the world about his own mental anguish after the death of his mother and his struggle with depression, he is showing us all something about the power of truth telling.

Jesus doesn't ask us to invent a whole new vocabulary to talk about God. He recasts the words and images we already have to serve the new narrative of the kingdom. He takes the vocabulary of agriculture and fishing and building and turns it to serve the purposes of justice, in a similar recasting of the old language of kingship. His teaching about the kingdom that he rules with the power of love not fear, draws on the stuff of ordinary life, lilies in the field, birds in the air, mustard seeds a growing, children sharing their lunch to feed a hungry crowd.

W H Vanstone's hymn says it beautifully, this kingdom led by the king who is not a king in any usual sense. It's all about:

Love that gives, gives ever more,

Gives with zeal, with eager hands,  
Spares not, keeps not, all outpours,  
ventures all, its all expends.

Drained is love in making full,  
Bound in setting others free,  
Poor in making many rich,  
Weak in giving power to be.

And the hymn ends with this in royal portrait:

Here is God; no monarch he,  
Throned in easy state to reign;  
Here is God, whose arms of love  
Aching, spent, the world sustain.

That's the kind of kingship Jesus points to: truth telling, self giving, justice making, generous sharing. He models that sort of leadership unlike any king who ever lived. Call him what you like. No title fits what he has to offer. All our images break down when we try to describe this man who shows us the way we need to follow and the truth we need to know.

What draws people to Jesus is not his title, but his truth telling. In the recent national survey on NZ faith and belief, conducted by the Wilberforce Foundation, even though only 17% of us have any regular connection with church, over half of us think Jesus is important and 92% of us claim to know something about him. In the midst of this ever so secular society, Jesus remains a compelling figure because he seems to be telling the truth.

And those of us who call him king, meaning by that that we give him our allegiance, should take heart from those figures. Because even those who don't know him well, are curious about him, and with our help might get to know him better.

It might not be smart to start the conversation with those who are curious, by talking about kings. Better I think to begin by talking about Jesus as the one who lives with our questions rather than provides all the answers; the one who is with us when we need him, the one who walks with us even when we don't recognise him immediately. King can come later. But those of us who do claim to know him, know that he is our king, in the sense that he is the one in whom we put our trust, who rules our lives, now and in the time to come.