

Community of Christ

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 24 November, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Raymond Joso

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Psalm 46; Matthew 4:23-5:12;

Contemporary Reading: “Amazon” by John Denver

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKAWsmvJ6Eg>

Good morning. Let me begin by the same greeting our Risen Jesus greeted his disciples, “Peace be with you!”

There is an observance in the Christian calendar called “Christ the King” Sunday, or “Reign of Christ” Sunday. Now, most of you have been in the church longer than me, yes? And you’ve heard of this Sunday, Christ the King. Today is that day, the day that the Christian calendar marks as Christ the King Sunday. But today I don’t want to talk about that – I hope it’s OK? I’ll explain why and I want to talk about the Community of Christ. Instead of Christ the King Sunday, let’s make it Community of Christ Sunday. Yes, it is the end of the Church Calendar year, so it’s going the full cycle. Next week we start Advent and it’s another cycle of the Church Calendar.

The reason why I don’t want to talk about Christ the King is because the title “king” for Christ, or for God, doesn’t mean much to me. I personally don’t relate to kings, and now, in year 2019, this perspective is certainly not unique – especially in Australia.

Throughout the week, I was still fascinated to learn the history of Christ the King Sunday. Robyn Floyd and the worship committee agreed with me that we should change it. But then I explained the reason why we should change. Not just because we just don’t like Christ the King Sunday.

Do you know that the observance was added into the Christian calendar only in 1925? As recently as that! Now, we look at the Christian calendar, and in general we cycle through – you know – Christmas, Advent, Lent, Pentecost - it goes back hundreds of years. Think it comes down to the Jewish observance that predated the Christian version. So, it’s going back hundreds of years, even thousands of years old. But, Christ the King? Less than 100 years.

I found out, as well, that the one that instituted this Christ the King Sunday was Pope Pius the Eleventh. Does anyone know who Pope Pius XI was? I thought it’s your Facebook friends – but I don’t know! He did that in reaction to the increase in nationalism he perceived around him – particularly nationalism associated with dictatorships in Europe.

In response to political nationalism, Pope Pius wanted Christians, or in his case especially Roman Catholics, to remember that Christ is sovereign above any political ruler or worldly power - a reminder to keep politics in check and give faith a higher priority.

I like the idea of remembering to give God a higher priority than the nation, and the reminder to keep political nationalism in check and emphasize faithfulness instead. But I am not convinced that celebrating Christ as “King” accomplishes this. And of course it is even more questionable as to whether celebrating Christ as King is faithful to a contemporary, progressive Christian theology.

Even worse – I do not think that celebrating Christ as King is even faithful to the biblical testimony to Christ’s nature. Jesus actually never said, “*All this I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me*”. Absolutely not.

Instead Jesus got down on his hands and knees to wash the feet of his followers. A king, washing feet? Hmm. My brain just went: *error!* Over and over again, we hear from the Gospel that Jesus is a humble servant. Over and over again, the Gospels portrayed Jesus as a teacher, not a ruler. Jesus embraced the outcasts and in the eyes of many was an outcast himself.

So, while some voices in the Christian tradition want to make Jesus Christ the King, I would like to take us somewhere different today. Now, if you think Christ the King is not in our community, it is. Some schools are named “Christ the King” schools. There’s one in North Rocks. I don’t have a problem with that. If your child goes to that school, I’m not having a go at them. But I think we should embrace today, something different.

We remember the teachings and the stories of Jesus earthly life. We read it today. We embrace the model of service and humility. I believe this is how God works – through service and humility, through inclusion and justice. I believe in this Christ because it fits my understanding of God’s work in the world – and not because I need to be on the winning team.

This is, for me, a model for how God operates. Instead of waving a majestic arm and issuing commands, God instead joins us here, in the full joy, pain and struggles of human life. Psalm 46 reminds us of that. It sings: “*God is in our midst, he will never fall – Come see what God has done – God makes the earth bounteous! God has put an end to war, breaking bows, splintering spears, and setting chariots on fire!*”! And we do hope that model reigns in our lives – reigns as an alternative to the reign of political power or military might.

Professor Walter Brueggemann once said that our society is committed to forgetting what it means to be human. It’s the church’s task to continue to bear witness to what we know about being human in Jesus of Nazareth.

Now you may ask, “*But, what about the gospel reading today from Matthew 5 – Jesus talked about the kingdom of heaven? There is that kingdom terminology that Jesus used?*” Well, yes, but he wasn’t teaching to set up a kingdom that then would lead him to be THE king and oppress people!

In fact, Jesus is actually saying a radical statement. It is Jesus’ alternative to the Roman Empire. It is asking God to set up God’s reign on earth instead of the repressive reign of Caesar. So I can understand that Jesus was using the word “kingdom” to oppose Caesar – and in the context maybe, the term ‘kingdom’ was easily understood in that world. But the message behind it is that, I think, Jesus envisions a different world, a different reign, which is God’s reign to take place on earth.

If you ask me, I would agree that now we could probably change the language from kingdom to (I believe) “kin-dom”, a term many Christian feminists have been using for several decades. Personally, I believe kin-dom is a good word and better reflects the kind of society Jesus envisions – as a shared community of equals who serve each other. This message has gone down to the Apostles, which we can see in the book of Acts, when the apostles plant small house churches, and when they write to them, they call them ἀδελφοὶ “adelphoi”; adelphoi in Greek means sisters and brothers. See the link between sisters and brothers and kin. United in a kin-group, not by blood, but in common loyalty to Jesus, to love one another, and not condemning or judging one another.

Now, a shared Community of Christ, of equals who serve each other may seem very obvious for us here at Pitt Street Uniting Church because that is our values; that is where we stand. But in reality, I do feel our wider society still struggles with this understanding of “kin-ship”.

Just this week, we heard a misunderstanding of this very point from our brother Israel Folau who said that the devastating bushfires – which killed six people - represented God’s punishment for the legalisation of same sex marriage and abortion. Ridiculous! A complete miss of the “kin-ship” point, and a complete miss of Jesus’ teaching on the Mount we heard today. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is asking us to realize that we are all blessed and beloved children of God.

Blessed are we in the amazing diversity of our ethnicity, age, ability, and orientation, for we make visible the glory of Creation. For in the glory of Creation we don’t just have “trees” or “flowers”. We have eucalyptus and bottlebrush and banksia and jacaranda and gum trees and lemon and orange and too many others to name. We don’t just have “birds”. We have pigeons and kookaburras and cockatoos and sparrows and magpies and flamingos and on and on and on.

We don’t just have “human”. We have black, brown, white, blond, gray and red hair. We have green and blue and brown and gray and hazel eyes. We have skin colours from palest peach to darkest brown. We have a multitude of ways to love one another, to be family together, to be in relationship with one another. And not only are we blessed with this diversity – and this is why I love this John Denver song, “Amazon”. Because we are connected.

The song John Denver sings helps us to embrace the notion of universal connectedness; an understanding that everything, and everyone, is connected and that the well-being of humanity depends on respecting that connectedness. What better way to show gratitude to the source of all life than to embrace and affirm all persons for their unique selves, to love all our siblings as ourselves, to look upon the endless variety of creation and declare with God that “it is good.”

This week, I was talking to the Chaplains that were deployed by the Uniting Church Disaster Recovery Unit (there were I think 35 Chaplains to respond to the bushfires - and this is also why I’m wearing my black stole). One of the chaplains is from our own Presbytery, from Strathfield Uniting Church, Rev Moni, said “*the trauma is really deep*”... *over 300 houses are destroyed, there is much uncertainty, they don’t know when they’ll be allowed back to their homes, or even if they’ve got a home to go back to.*” Being a Chaplain, Rev Moni also said that “*People appreciate having someone to talk to, and hear their stories. After a while they start to connect.*”

“There were three people we spoke to who lost their homes,” says Moni. “It is just the most disheartening thing. You cry with them, but at the same time you marvel at their resilience, because you know they’re going back to face what’s ahead of them.” Amid the pain, Rev Moni said it was wonderful to see the whole community come together to support each other - and to even support the koalas. *“Locals turned up with prepared meals, coffee cart owners gave away free coffees, people even brought feed for people’s animals and livestock.” “A lady with a ukulele even came down and was telling stories to the kids.” “People really let the evacuees know they were not alone and they were cared for.”*

Now if you want to know what “The Truth of Jesus Christ” looks like – there it is. There it is! Christ being in the midst of humanity and creation, despite events that are demoralising, there you can see a community of Christ offer strength, particularly in these tough times. God joins us here, in the fullness and hardship of Creation.

So the Christian year comes full circle. Don’t worry too much about what Pope Pius the 11th said. But look today as we close the Church calendar year, we remember Immanuel God, we remember that God is in your life, and in the midst of all things.

A God, through Jesus’ teachings we heard, that embraces all people, all animals, every bit of creation – and to create a Community of Christ that transform lives, not through coercion or force, but through humility, service and extreme love.

Thanks be to God, for today we celebrate a Community of Christ Sunday.