

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

King Jesus

Presented by Margaret Hall

Introduction

Children of all cultures like chanting rhymes. Some of them aren't very nice, like the one we used to chant when we found ourselves higher up than someone else - up a tree perhaps, or on top of the monkey bars:

*I'm the king of the castle
And you're the dirty rascal.*

It wasn't nice. But it does express, if in a rather primitive way, how human beings like to feel - superior to others. We do like to be important - to be kings and queens in our own little worlds. That desire for power and importance can bring out the worst in us. As Lord Acton famously said, "Power tends to corrupt". Wanting power and importance draws us into putting others down, or at least into looking down on them, in order to look better ourselves. It's extremely doubtful whether we're capable of being important or having power without seeking at least some benefit for ourselves. With one glorious exception: God's chosen and anointed King - Jesus - the Christ.

1.

When Jesus of Nazareth was travelling around teaching and healing, the question that was often asked was, "Could this be the Christ?" God's chosen and anointed ruler had long been expected, in the hope he'd bring justice and healing and unity to a broken and divided world.

It was Peter who first turned the question into a statement: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." In response Jesus said Peter wouldn't have been able to recognise him as king without God's help. That's as true today as it was then. Because in many ways, Jesus doesn't fit what we expect a king to be like. No crown - except the one hastily made out of thorns, as a joke to mock his claim to be king. No sword - except his words that still cut through to the human heart, like, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest". No high-bred steed to ride on - just a donkey borrowed from a friend. No throne - except a rough wooden cross of the kind on which criminals were strung up to die.

As it happened, Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey was recognized by many people as the keeping of an ancient promise about how the Saviour-King would come. And even when dying on a cross, his kingly authority couldn't be hidden. Remember how two criminals were dying on their crosses alongside him? How one of them rebuked the other for hurling insults at him, then called out to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom"? And how Jesus accepted that recognition of who he is. Ever-merciful, he assured that convicted criminal they'd be together in paradise that same day.

There can be no doubt that Jesus had kingly authority and power, although the way he used it was certainly different from the norm. There was never the slightest suggestion that he used it to coerce people. He simply invited them to follow him, and they did.

He reversed the laws of nature with all the command of the one who'd put them in place. At a word from him a storm whipping up the Sea of Galilee disappeared and the choppy water was instantly calm. He wielded his power over the unseen forces of the spirit world, and over the processes of disease and death.

The crowds were amazed at the authority with which he taught, as one who knew what he was talking about; although for his part he repeatedly affirmed that what he said came from God. He frequently withdrew from the publicity that all this brought. He often directed those he healed not to tell anyone what he'd done. Consistently he lived out what he said of himself, that he did not seek his own glory. To have all that power and not to use even a little of it to suit and promote oneself - surely that's unique in the history of humankind.

2.

But wouldn't we be foolish to be in a position of power, and not use it to benefit ourselves? That's what anyone would do. Take Gideon, for example. The Israelites were so impressed with his victories over their oppressors they asked him to be their king. Gideon knew exactly the right thing to say. "No," he said. "God is your ruler." But he couldn't bring himself to stop there - to gain nothing for himself from such a moment. So he said, "I do have one request - just one ear-ring from each of you."

"Gladly," they said. So they spread out a cloth on the ground, and everyone threw a ring onto it. The weight of the gold alone came to seventeen hundred shekels (we'd say about twenty kilos). But they also threw in other ornaments and pendants and purple garments, and the chains from around the camels' necks, all of which Gideon could have refused, but didn't. He had the gold made into an object which he set up in his home town. We read that all Israel prostituted themselves by worshipping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family.

Only one person has proved himself capable of being powerful and important in a way that's not tainted by self-interest. It's not that Christ Jesus wasn't tempted to think about himself. Again and again he had to face down the evil one, whom he called "the prince of this world". Satan for his part used every trick he could think of to get Jesus to protect and promote himself.

Like the time Jesus was by himself out in the desert. After weeks of fasting he was very hungry. The flat stones lying all around him reminded him of bread, and the evil one got him thinking that he could use his power as God the Son to turn them into bread. But Jesus reminded the devil what God had said to his people long before: "Human beings don't live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God's mouth." That is, there are more important things than food, like the truth that Jesus' power was not to be used for himself.

The devil came back at him. "It's also written that God won't let you come to any harm. So if you are the Son of God, why don't you throw yourself down from the highest point of the Temple? When the crowds see you're not injured in any way, they'll be really impressed." Jesus replied, "It's also written, "Don't put the Lord your God to the test."

“Well,” said the devil, “this world belongs to me anyway. Everything in it is mine. I’ll give it to you, if you’ll just bow down and worship me.” Of course he was lying. If Jesus had given him the praise that belongs to God, Jesus himself would have come under his control. He said to him, “Get away from me, Satan. Only God is worthy of worship.”

Pleasing ourselves, trying to impress others and failing to give God the glory that’s his. In whatever form these temptations come to us, we give in to them again and again. Jesus alone stood firm.

3.

Jesus continued to do battle on our behalf with the forces of evil. And when he was hanging on a cross, killed for his claim to be the king God sent, it looked as if evil had triumphed. But for our eternal good and God’s eternal glory, the end of evil was signalled, when the tomb where they’d laid his body was found empty, and Jesus himself was seen alive by hundreds of witnesses. In his last words before he returned to God the Father, Jesus said, “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”

For much of the next three hundred years the power of the mighty Roman Empire pitted itself against the power that refuses to seek its own benefit. Roman emperors tended to want to be worshipped as Lord of all. Christians claimed Christ was Lord, often at the risk of their lives.

One day a Roman army captain gathered his friends and neighbours together and called Jesus’ disciple Peter to come and talk to them. Peter said the them, “You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, through Jesus, the Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what happened throughout Judea beginning in Galilee...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the evil one... We witnessed it all. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day. He commanded us to tell everyone that God’s appointed him as the judge of all people - living and dead.” All those listening to Peter were then baptized into the name of King Jesus.

Some fifty years later ever-increasing numbers of Christians were found in every corner of the Empire, still making the astounding claim - that a crucified Jewish peasant was the Lord of all. Over against them the Emperor Domitian was demanding he be called “our Lord and God”, and doing everything in his considerable power to exterminate Christians - persecution that was to continue for centuries after his death. But through the power that doesn’t seek its own benefit people continued to make Jesus their Lord.

This is how a North African called Cyprian described Christians in a letter to a friend to tell him he’d become one:

This is a cheerful world as I see it from my garden under the shadows of my vines. But if I were to ascend some high mountain and look out over the wide lands, you know very well what I’d see: armies fighting, cities burning; in the amphitheatres men murdered to please applauding crowds; selfishness and cruelty and misery and despair under every roof. It’s an incredibly bad world, Donatus. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people, who have learned a great secret. They’ve found a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. These people, Donatus, are the Christians, and I am one of them.

Cyprian himself was martyred in A.D.257. Eighty years later the Roman Empire's persecution of Christians came to an end, when the Emperor himself was baptised into the name of King Jesus. By that time, and through no power but the power of selfless love, as many as half the Empire's sixty million residents were Christians.

Conclusion

Who or what is the king of our castle, influencing, and deciding, what we do and think? Is it what other people say? - the ever-changing attitudes of the society we live in? - the bombardments of advertising? Are we governed only by what's good for us personally?

There is only one who's proved self-less enough to be trusted with such power. In words sung by the very first Christians:

*Though Christ was in very nature God,
he did no consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing.
Taking the very nature of a servant...
he humbled himself and became obedient to death,
even death on a cross!*

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place,
and gave him a name above every name -
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*