

High St Uniting Church Frankston
Luke 23:33 - 43

Who rules?



Each year we celebrate the Reign of Christ or Christ the King on the last week of the liturgical year, before we turn our attention to Advent and Christmas, but it's sometimes hard to see that theme in the reading that the Lectionary presents us. Yes, the account of Jesus crucifixion includes the title "King of the Jews", but that's a taunt, isn't it? A jeering rebuke by the soldiers and Pilate. Wouldn't it be better to have one of the parables of Jesus about the kingdom? Or one of the resurrection

accounts? Are we left trying to imagine the cross as Jesus' throne, with all the irony of who is on his right and who is on his left?

It's a puzzle, with a few pieces that need to be connected, that centres on an understanding of the kingdom that Jesus is king of. The kingdom that is not about power and royalty or pomp and circumstance, but about service and sacrifice and love and justice. Which is what the cross is all about; holding up power and brutality and injustice to criticism and judgement.

When you hear, and speak, the phrase in the Lord's Prayer - Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven – where do you put the punctuation? I have seen a few different versions of this phrase, in different translations of scripture, because Greek isn't punctuated like English.

Is it two separate statements?

Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Is it one statement, but with two ideas?

Your kingdom come, your will be done. On earth as it is in heaven.

Or, is it a conditional sentence?

'Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' being the definition of what 'Your kingdom come means'.

Jesus going to the cross is him demonstrating what doing God's will means, just as he said in his prayers in the garden before his arrest – 'not my will but yours'. As I said earlier, a king sets the tone for how the kingdom will operate. In Jesus' kingdom, we look for, and follow, the will of God. And hanging on that cross – following the will of God – he lives out the will of God in loving compassion for the thief hanging beside him. The tone of the kingdom of Jesus is to resist injustice with loving service, to fight rejection with compassion, and to meet humility with mercy.

Jesus in the garden saying 'not my will but yours' reminds us of the story of Adam and Eve in the garden saying 'not your will but ours'. The very definition of sin is not the failings in morality and behaviour that we think of – they're the symptoms and consequences – it is to break the relationship with God and the seeking of God's will. Jesus' kingdom is about restoring that relationship, bringing us back to seeking and following the will of God. There is a well-known poem by William Ernest Henley called *Invictus*, and I know a few people who have taken the last stanza of that poem as their motto for living.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,

I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.

The kingdoms of this world owe a lot to the playing out of people chasing their own will – power, money, security, prestige – and all those things come with violence, corruption, avarice, and fear. The kingdoms of this world are why Jesus was hung on that cross. The plaque that Pilate had inscribed for the cross is loaded with irony. He is crucified for challenging Caesar by being the king of the Jews, and yet this crucifixion is the great demonstration of his kingship of the kingdom of God, living out and following the will of God.

So, we put together a picture that shows that the cross, and all the terrible things Jesus endured, is indeed a statement of what we mean when we call Jesus, king. He is the embodiment of what God is calling for when we say, “your will be done”.

All of that theology and nice philosophical argument is just dancing around the question that most of us now have nagging at our minds. If we are in the kingdom of God, and that is all about God’s will, what is God’s will? What is God’s will for my life? What is God’s will for this congregation? I think we can get caught in what we mean when we say, ‘will of God’. Do we mean God’s will for the way the kingdom will operate? Or do we mean a particular plan for our life? To further confuse you, there’s a piece of ancient wisdom that says, “You cannot know the will of God until you live the will of God.” That is, step aside from seeking some personal insight into your place and purpose in the world and focus on what God is calling for all of us to do in our daily living – faith, love, mercy, justice, and compassion. If Jesus is our king and setting the focus and tone for the kingdom, then we are faced with a king who lives a life of compassion, mercy, acceptance, and inclusion, and even goes to the cross to establish that kingdom. And even in the throes of agony in that dreadful death, he takes the time to continue to live out God’s will for compassion and inclusion with a thief hanging beside him.

Live out your place as a member of Jesus’ kingdom. Live out compassion, service, love, mercy, welcome, and inclusion. Live with hospitality and genuine listening. Live as if you were not the most important person in any situation of conversation. And, most importantly, live connected to God and Christ in prayer, reflection, and learning. And in that intentional living, any particular calling or will for your life can emerge.

Derisively called the ‘king of the Jews’ at his death, proclaimed the ‘king of kings’ in prophecy and scripture, titled ‘Lord’ by his first followers, Jesus is supreme in the kingdom of love and service that he founded through his life, death, and resurrection. We don’t look to a king in power and glory, but the king who is servant and leader, teacher and example, welcomer and listener, and the One who brings God close.