

The Revelation to John 1. 4-8

John 18. 33 - 38

The king and the queen have just been here; to wave the flag. King Charles and Queen Camilla's first visit as sovereigns to Australia. I'm yet to be used to having that holiday weekend in June referred to as King's Birthday weekend – or to accomplished lawyers being referred to as King's Counsel, rather than Queen's Counsel. For seventy years Elizabeth's countenance was impressed on our coin and notes, lurking there in our hip pockets and in our handbags, hanging on our classroom walls and other public buildings, her name prefacing our laws and the legal foundation of property ownership. The power and the impact of the sovereign reign was everywhere. Long to reign over us. The pink girdle which corseted the world was in the main, in our time, benign and seeking the commonweal of the nations colonised by the British. But it was not always so, the pax Britannia.

Pilate the Roman Emperor's delegate in Israel asks Jesus: *are you the king of the Jews*. The representative of the king has all the bristling power of the pax Romana at his disposal – so it doesn't really matter what Jesus answers. He has the power of life and death, so it's a kind of game to him. Pilate is portrayed differently in each of the gospels. In Matthew washing his hands of the blood lust of the crowd; here in John, more offhand, disinterested, willing to play with categories that ultimately are irrelevant in the face of the empire's power. So he can play with ideas. So, you are a king? Unlike the impostor King, Herod, in Matthew's nativity, who is infuriated by the notion of a contender to his power, Pilate does not fear Jesus as a challenger.

You say that I am a king. I think there should be a paragraph break here. You say that I am a king.

And then a new idea! *For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.'*

My coming into the world was not be a king – although everyone seems to want me to be one – either to save them – or to be able to oppose.

*For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.* So, in reading this scene in Pilate's headquarters, John's gospel draws towards its conclusion – to the revealing of the glory of the only Son. In the prologue to John's gospel, those exquisite words which set the scene for the whole gospel – *in the beginning was the Word* – as this Word become flesh is introduced to us we hear the phrase: *and we have seen his glory – full of grace and truth*. So, here in this moment before Pilate we see Jesus – the faithful witness - testify to the truth. Alone, vulnerable, betrayed, abandoned: I came into the world to testify to the truth.

Now John contains that famous saying of Jesus: *I am the way, the truth and the life*. The church with its colonial, proselytising mindset has used this saying as a kind of divine mandate, with a colonising mindset formed by the kingdom of this world mindsets through the past two millennia. We have the truth and we're bringing it to you. A kind of truth waddy.

We have done a violence to the words of John and what his gospel seeks to say about Jesus, this one standing vulnerable before Pilate. Jesus saying *I am the truth* is one of seven I Am sayings offering multiple metaphors for the life of God found in this one full of grace and truth. I am the door; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the true vine; ...

Nevertheless, in spite of our not-so-humble Christian colonising of the world, the church through its long history has been dedicated and vigilant in its search for truth. In the wake of the enlightenment and the pervasive rationality in the way we experience the world, we have confused the quest for truth in the way of Christ with a search for some kind of verifiable, measurable, arguable, enforceable, truth about God. But here standing before Pilate, in the one who is the faithful witness, is simply embodied truth, truth-of-being oriented toward a vision of what the Revelation says is Jesus' God and Father. Jesus is the faithful witness to his image of God. And it is this image of God, found in Jesus, that frees us to be a kingdom, also living into this vision of the divine reign.

Writing and reading and learning have been an utterly core part of the church's quest for truth. We are a people of the written and spoken word. Our learning is a quest to hear of other's experience and learning along the way and for us to be able to reflect, both personally and with two or three gathered together, on what it means in our own time, in our own particular circumstances to discern the path for ourselves; for us to also be faithful witnesses to the freedom found in the liberating work of Christ.

One of the mistakes the church has made in our own time, maybe it was as though we dropped the ball and have fumbled to pick it up again, is that for many of us, Christian education was a kind of imparting of information – about Jesus, God, the Bible, the church; collecting gold stars along the way. And that was all. This was what happened in Sunday School; and we advanced, if we continued to be taken or sent, from kindergarten, through junior and senior Sunday school, into youth group and PFA or the Methodist equivalent and confirmation.

My observation as a child, of the teenagers around me in the 1960s, was that confirmation was a kind of exit point from the church. The education finished and, like school, people left. What took place though was that we failed to be able to respond to a generation who had been taught to think for themselves – and our elders were ill-equipped to respond to or also wrestle with the questions for truth which were being asked. They had been schooled in a way where you accepted what your elders told and taught you; and that was what you did. The church's inability to respond to the immense cultural shift that has taken place since the early 1960s is nobody's fault. It just is. We didn't know how to learn and reflect for a new time.

A need to learn, to reflect together, to wrestle with deep existential questions of faith does not stop when we enter adulthood. It is a life-long quest, this search for truth. And one of the ways we can do this is by accessing the learning and wisdom of those who have gone before us and in our own time. I can recall Al Macrae once saying that being Christian is complicated and we shouldn't pretend it's not and so this life-long quest for discovery of the life of God calls for a, as Eugene Petersen calls it, long obedience in the one direction. Keeping our hand to the plough, staying on the narrow way that leads to life – not the narrow-minded way – but the narrow path, continuing to hunger and thirst after a faithful orientation toward God.

A ministry colleague of mine who has school-aged children and had been a school chaplain became a member of his children's primary school board. He was deeply impressed by the culture of the school which was, he said, motivated by a posture of learning. It was the culture of the school, not just a mission statement for the sign by the school gate. This posture of learning was lived into by the staff first and informed the culture of the whole school; of students but also of the families they came from. Everyone was there because they wanted to be and were enlisted in this collective project. A culture of curiosity and openness was developed which was infectious and enlivening.

What about a church like this, I wonder? A church with a posture of learning. Where the personal and collective curiosity and openness is life-long, from cradle to grave. I have come to understand my own questions as the invitation to go on a quest; searching. Maybe this is for me a thing of temperament and so it comes easily to me. But Christians have come to be viewed by many as obnoxious in their certainty. But I wonder if the proclaimed certainty, actually belies a deep uncertainty, a fear of not having it all pinned down. Or that maybe we want easy answers, avoiding the work of deep integration which sometimes the circumstances of our lives demand if we are to become whole.

Learning, reflection, openness, curiosity, faith, and doubt should be at the heart of the Christian community as we travel on the way together. As we launch the library in the memory of David Walker today I hope that it will become an impetus for a ferment of the Spirit amongst us, each of us and all of us, that we may come to know more clearly the grace and truth of God in the way of Christ.

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