
Out of this World

John 18.33-37

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 22, 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

The great jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis was top of the bill one night at a famous club in New York City. He was playing “I Don’t Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You” and reached a dramatic moment in his conclusion. At that moment a cellphone started ringing in the auditorium. Audience and trumpeter paused in a moment of anxious tension as the embarrassed caller scuttled out into the lobby. Then Marsalis began first to play, then to improvise on the cellphone’s ringtone. Over the next few minutes he resolved the improvisation and arrived back at the moment where he had left off, at the closing bars “with you.” [See Kirk Byron Jones, *The Jazz of Preaching* Nashville: Abingdon 2004 79-80]

The arrested, insulted, and assaulted Jesus stands before Pontius Pilate on the first Good Friday morning, and Pilate asks the question, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Here we witness the same moment of anxious tension we noted in that New York jazz club. What is Jesus going to say, or to do? What he does is what Wynton Marsalis did – he weaves the rude interruption into a much larger canvas that displays the full character of his mission and his rule. “My kingdom is not from this world.” He doesn’t say no, I’m not a king; he doesn’t say yes. He says, “You...have...no...idea.”

It’s a cryptic answer, so it may not be surprising that over the centuries the church has tried to fit it into a couple of simpler agendas. The first one says, “Jesus isn’t king of this world, he’s king of the next. He’s not king of the physical, he’s king of the spiritual. He’s not king of earth, he’s king of heaven.” Now there’s an old joke that traditionally the bride’s father tells at an English wedding. He says, “In my marriage, we have a division of responsibilities between the important decisions and the unimportant decisions. My wife decides the unimportant things, like where we should live, and where the children should go to school, and when we need to buy a new car. I make all the important decisions like which party should be in government and when our country should go to war.”

The joke’s based on a similar distinction to the separation between worldly and spiritual arising from Jesus’ reply to Pilate. In this view Jesus is too darn heavenly to be any earthly use. We know Jesus is looking after our long term interests but that tells us next to nothing about the here and now. And if we’re pragmatic people, which we mostly are, we’ll look for the most effective and efficient way of running things in this world, confident that Jesus has the next world buttoned up. There’s a harsh way to describe this view of Jesus’ spiritual authority, and that’s to call it practical atheism. It’s practical atheism because, while it’s confident in Christ’s eternal promises, it’s hard to point to a single concrete step it makes differently given that it believes Christ is king. Christianity ends up being the icing on a cake that’s really about pragmatism or power politics.

Let’s look at the second way the church has tried to understand the words, “My kingdom is not from this world.” This view says, “Jesus is king of heaven and he’s taking over the earth too and we’re his followers so we get to take over the earth on his behalf.” The logic of this view says, “Jesus is king; he doesn’t seem to be king right now in a number of influential areas; so we must assert his right to be king in those areas by being king there ourselves.” The trouble with this is it ends up as if Jesus had said “My kingdom is very much from this world.” The church’s certainty that it has a right to rule is seldom matched by its desire to rule in the spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and gentleness. Like George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, where the revolutionary animals gradually become more and more like the humans they’ve displaced, this triumphalist reading of Christianity ends up with the Christians in charge but ruling no differently from their worldly predecessors.

If we are going to celebrate Christ as our king, we can’t let ourselves lapse into spiritualization or triumphalism. Spiritualizing Jesus makes him king but not king over anything that really matters. Triumphalism asserts Jesus as king but is really more about proclaiming ourselves as king. Remember the tragic words of G.K. Chesterton: “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.” If Christ is king, then Christ is king of everything that matters. And we are not.

My parents were two of the worst car drivers I've ever known. The number of car accidents they each had when they were driving with me beside them in the car was only exceeded by the number of accidents they each had when they were driving without me beside them in the car. I'm glad to say they never injured any one but themselves. You can imagine how tempted I was to be a back seat driver. I sometimes imagine how many hours of worthwhile things I could have done had I come sooner to the conclusion that my vigilance toward the windscreen and wing mirror wasn't going to prevent any of these little surprises. Christ the King is the day when we resolve not to be a back seat driver in Christ's car. Christ is the king. We are not. And unlike my experience on the back seat growing up, that should come as a relief, not a threat.

Pontius Pilate knows nothing of what it means for Christ to be king. He fears the triumphalist king who'll make trouble for him. It's easy to see why he would execute such a person. And he has a vague sense of the spiritual king who's too heavenly minded to be any earthly use, although if we regard Jesus as only a spiritual king we have to find some explanation for why anyone would have thought it necessary to execute him. The trouble is, we understand Pilate's kingdom better than we understand Christ's kingdom. We're so captivated by Pilate's kingdom that it's not that we try Christianity and find it wanting; instead we never really try it.

Just imagine how different our lives might be if we really believed Christ was king! Just imagine how different Christ's kingdom is from Pilate's kingdom!

Pilate's kingdom says, "Life's too short." You may have caught yourself saying it. "Life's too short." It's a way of telling people you're busy, efficient, and not one for wasting time. But if Christ is king, life is plenty long enough for the things that matter, for embodying goodness, for discovering truth, for beholding beauty. Sure, life's too short to cram in visits to every tourist site in the Lonely Planet's top thousand places to see before you die, sure, life's too short to study every major offered by the Duke arts and sciences faculty, sure, life's too short to read every book written or learn every language or play every sport to varsity standard or leave an indelible mark on the world. But aren't those aspirations a sign of anxiety that Christ is not king and that we must substitute for the quality of his rule with the quantity of our endeavors? *Are you living your life in a terrific hurry?* Are you trying to squeeze in just a few more people, just a few more experiences, just a bit more candy than will really fit? Are you living a breathless existence right now as if life really was too short? Hear the gospel: Christ is king over time and eternity. He reigns over life and eternal life. He made time and he's redeemed time. In him there is always time for everything that really matters.

Pilate's kingdom says, "Life is unfair." These are words of despair and resignation in the face of injustice. Or they are words of malevolence and cynicism from the perpetrators of injustice. But if Christ is king, justice will roll like a never failing stream. When we see terrible injustice and wanton oppression, the kingdom of this world says we must pile in and set things straight, however clumsy and ignorant we may be in doing so, and if we need force to set things straight we must do whatever it takes and make whatever alliances we need to ensure we have the right amount of force at our disposal. But in the kingdom of Christ God says "Vengeance is *mine*, not yours; *I will repay.*" There will indeed be a judgement day, a great day with the righteous marching, and the Lord will wipe away the tears from the sore oppressed and put down the mighty from their seat and exalt the humble and meek. Do you long for a just and free world? How much of that passion for justice rests on an anxiety that in the end Christ is not just, Christ is not Lord, and Christ is not king? Any justice we make for ourselves is provisional. We can never know all the facts, we can never set everything straight, we can never undo the past, we can never ourselves restore the years the swarming locust has eaten. But if you're lapsing into cynicism or despair, hear the good news: Christ is Lord and king; he brings a justice that we can never find; he shows a mercy that we can only dream of. He is the justice of God.

Pilate's kingdom says, "Responsibility is the payback you make for privilege." If you have advantages in life, you take on what used to be called *noblesse oblige*: you're supposed to give something back by running things as selflessly as possible. But if Christ is king, the world is fundamentally run by him, not by us. Our job isn't to be responsible, it's to be faithful. And being faithful means living the kind of life made possible when we believe that Christ is king over time, over injustice, over all rulers and powers and dominions. Being faithful means living a life that makes others wonder where we get this freedom, this joy, this carefree way of just being, this peace that passes all understanding. Almost every Duke undergraduate I know has been taught since they were a toddler that their job is to get ready to run the world. Well, hear the good news: *Christ is running the world.*

He's been running it a good while now. Our job is to live a life like his – a life that witnesses to our faith that the world isn't made by us, isn't sustained by us, and can't be finally set right by us, but has been made, is sustained and will finally be set right by one who loves us more than we can imagine, suffers more for us than we'll ever know, and shapes his whole life to be in relationship with us. If Christ rules by being born into a homeless family, soon becoming a refugee, living a life of obscurity in an unfashionable small town, spending his time with fishermen and carpenters and lepers and sinners, and being executed alongside thieves and rebels, who are we to say we have better ideas?

Pilate's kingdom says, "Choice is everything." The definitive identity of the kingdom of today's world is to be a consumer, and the exquisite moment of being a consumer is to have the thrilling experience of choice. We want a new shirt. We can have it in cotton, we can have it in polycotton, we can have it in linen, we can have it in silk, we can have it in organic viscose with recycled poly-unsyphonated styrotex (ummm, so smooth against the skin and no ironing! How 'bout that!). Shopping isn't about wearing; it's about choosing. And choice is just a nice word for power. Consumer society is like a drug that fills our minds with so many trivial choices that it exhausts our appetite for exercising real power. But if Christ is king, choice is about giving power away. God gave up his power of choice when he chose us. God already made his choice. He chose us. If Christ is our king, we've given up the titillating power of choice because we've already chosen him. Choice means keeping your options open. God's options *aren't* open. He's chosen *us*. If Christ is our king, *our* options aren't open. We've chosen *him*.

Finally, Pilate's kingdom says, "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die." And now we discover what the real issue is. The real issue is death. Death seems to demolish everything about life. And in the face of death, Pilate's kingdom invents compelling words, like hurry, justice, responsibility, and choice, words that offer to manage or distract from the horror of death. These are the words that dominate our imaginations, dominate what we think is thinkable, if we live in Pilate's kingdom. Which in many ways, we all do. But if Christ is king, then death reigns no more. If Christ is king, death is not the end but the beginning. If Christ is king, we don't need to manage or distract from death, because our life is in Christ's hands, and those are the safest hands we'll ever know.

And this is how Christ is king. Christ is like a great jazz trumpeter. Christ is playing a tune, a song of love, and longing, and desire for us. And we are like a mindless cellphone that rings discordantly and threatens to ruin the whole of this coruscating creation. And Christ pauses. And there's that moment of dramatic tension and grief and anger and loss, which we could call judgement. And then slowly, painstakingly, but eventually thrillingly and joyfully, Christ weaves us back into the improvised melody until all is resolved and in harmony for ever. That's out of this world. That's the gospel. That's what it means to say Christ is king.