

The king in God's upside down kingdom

The rule of three ...

There is a rule that suggests things that come in threes are inherently more satisfying, more effective and more comical than any other number. So we have three word political slogans like 'Building our economy', games like 'rock, paper, scissors', stories that have a beginning, a middle and an ending. It's probably why we have three wise men in the Christmas story even though their number is never given – just that they brought three gifts – of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

So today we have three readings.

Three snapshots of Jesus.

Three ways of viewing Jesus the king.

This is not be the way we normally think about Jesus – as a king – and yet whenever we call him Jesus **Christ** that's exactly what we're doing.

Christ is simply the Greek translation of the Hebrew word **Messiah** which means Anointed One or King. So – sticking with our theme of three – we have three ways of calling Jesus a King – Christ, Messiah, and of course our English word **King**.

Three snapshots

Taking the three readings we heard, one at a time ...

First, from the prophet **Jeremiah** ... among all his criticism of the corrupt rulers of his day, Jeremiah brings a small bit of sunshine and hope. In the future, God will raise up a different sort of ruler – a king who will reflect God's own character of righteousness and justice – who will bring peace and salvation to Israel. The NT writers suggest that Jesus is that king.

The reading from **Luke's Gospel** describes the crucifixion of Jesus, who is mocked for being a false king. Jesus certainly doesn't look much like a king here – stripped nearly naked, apparently powerless and the object of cruel taunts. Yet Jesus the servant king speaks words of forgiveness, inclusion and the promise of salvation. In keeping with his message of an upside-down kingdom, the cross forms a kind of gruesome throne for his last words.

Then in the reading from **Colossians** we have an early Christian hymn about Jesus who reigns at God's right hand. Jesus is described as both Creator and Redeemer using language that is usually reserved for God. The writer claims that Jesus is in fact the human image of the invisible God. So if we want to see what God is like, we have only to look at Jesus. Further, if we want to have right relationship with this God, the way has been opened up by Jesus.

So three perspectives on the kingship of Jesus:

- the **just king** who follows God's ways
- the **servant king** who cares for others until his dying breath
- and the **heavenly king** who holds all of life and all of reality together

Rather than simply choose our favourite image from these three, we're invited to hold all of them in tension.

[Luke's perspective on righteous living](#)

Today being the final Sunday in the year of Luke, I want to take a brief look at the three readings again through the lens of Luke's story in Luke and Acts ...

Luke specifically sets his story against the backdrop of the great kingdoms and empires of the day – Caesar Tiberius rules in Rome and King Herod in Galilee. Rome ruled through a mix of **violence, economic power and fear**. King Herod is similar, combining **ruthlessness, cruelty and greed** – the sort of king

Jeremiah spoke against. Neither Caesar nor Herod could be described as righteous or just.

But the **kingdom** that Jesus the **king** is establishing will work very differently. In the opening chapter of Luke's Gospel – in Mary's Magnificat – the powerful will be brought down from their thrones and the lowly lifted up. John the Baptist calls people to repent – or change – to be honest, generous and refrain from violence – in other words to live by God's ways. Jesus' message is similar – he has come to preach good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind and to bring the year of God's favour or grace. This is the alternative kingdom vision that is coming through Jesus, who often speaks and acts more like a prophet than a king.

The challenge for anyone who dares to follow King Jesus is that we are called to reflect the just character of God's kingdom. What we do and say every day will be signposts to those around us as to whether we follow the righteous king. Also whether we actively pursue justice in the world or whether we let greedy and powerful interests maintain the status quo. Will we stand with indigenous people seeking recognition and a voice, or with asylum seekers exercising their right to seek safety and welcome, or with those who attempt to preserve creation?

It will never be comfortable if we follow the footsteps of Jesus and pursue the ways of peace and justice.

[Luke's perspective on serving others](#)

Thinking about the second image – **Jesus the servant king** – is a bit of an oxymoron. Kings generally live in luxury and have servants to wait on them. They usually make the rules for others and reward or punish them accordingly. Jesus doesn't fit this image of a king. He teaches that if people want to be great, they should take up the role of a servant and serve others. Right up to his dying breath on the cross, Jesus is serving others.

First he forgives those responsible for his death, thus showing amazing mercy and compassion. He then offers grace to the criminal dying alongside him – ‘**Today** you will be with me in Paradise’. This is similar to Jesus’ announcement to Zacchaeus we looked at a couple of weeks ago – ‘Today, salvation has come to this house’.

Jesus’ whole life and ministry focused on living out this message – restoring, reconciling, healing, including all manner of people as deserving of God’s blessing – women, Samaritans, lepers, tax collectors, shepherds and various people described as ‘sinners’. The best known stories in Luke’s Gospel – the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son – both feature people showing compassion to and serving others.

For those of us who choose to follow this servant king, we too are called to base our lives on the upside down kingdom values of mercy, grace and love. As we have received God’s blessing, so we are to be a channel to pass this blessing on to others – as we meet them and discern their needs. We do this in many different ways, but it will often be costly and take us to places and to people that we wouldn’t normally associate with.

... yet of the three images we’re thinking about this morning, I suspect it is this image of Jesus the Servant King that we feel most comfortable with.

[Luke’s perspective on the resurrected king](#)

Then there’s the third image of the **heavenly king**, which may be the most difficult for us to grasp, even if it’s the one that has caught the imagination of artists and song writers down through the centuries. After all, who wouldn’t rather sing about and follow a triumphant king than a weak and crucified king?

One of Luke's key messages in his second volume, the book of Acts, is that Jesus has indeed risen from death and now leads and guides the church from a position of **power** at God's right hand. It's a big claim to make, but in speech after speech in Acts the early Christians all share this assumption – that Jesus is alive and is still with them in a powerful way.

In Acts there is also a subtle but important shift in emphasis as the message shifts from Jesus announcing the coming of **God's kingdom** to Jesus' followers witnessing about **Jesus the King**. As this message goes out into the Roman world of the first century, there is a clash between the claims of the powerful, ruling king – Caesar – and the claims of the rival king – Jesus. Although the early Christians are consistently persecuted and suffer, it seems that nothing can stop the spread of their message – guided and empowered as it is by the Spirit – of Jesus – who is now hidden from sight but who still guides the life of the church. It is this risen Jesus, described as co-Creator and Redeemer, who is celebrated in the hymn in Colossians and who is worshipped by the early church.

And again there is challenge if we want to follow in the footsteps of Jesus the heavenly king. Just as the Holy Spirit empowered Jesus to embody God's grace and love, so too the Spirit – of Jesus – will empower **us** to embody and live out the grace and love of Jesus our King. But this will require us to listen carefully for the voice of Jesus and then have the courage to go where he leads. As we do so, we will show the world a different meaning of power and strength – not to rule **over** others but rather to **love** and **serve** them.

This is our ongoing challenge and purpose.

[tags Jeremiah 23:5–6, Luke 23:33–43, Colossians 1:15–20]