

**Sermon preached at Christ Church South Yarra
Feast of Christ the King – 20 November 2005
The 150th Anniversary of the founding of the Parish Community**

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It is a day of anniversaries. You know, I think, that this parish was actively being brought into being 150 years ago, and that the first service was held in December 1855. Many will also know that 130 years ago next month, this building was consecrated by Bishop Samuel Thornton of Ballarat. Only the very keen and the parish archivist will be able to tell you that 125 years and 9 days ago not only was the Revd Horace Tucker, second incumbent of the parish, inducted here but Ned Kelly was hanged. I will not seek to compete with more knowledgeable locals beyond this point.

But there are other dates of significance to recall today, if we cast our glance a little wider. Today is in fact, liturgically speaking, the 80th anniversary of this Feast of Christ the King, instituted and first celebrated by Pope Pius XI in 1925. The history of Christ Church of course precedes that date, but its adoption for your feast of title indicates the open-endedness of your history, and the ecumenical character of the recent history of this parish and of the wider Church.

Pope Pius' initiative to found a feast of Christ the King took place against a backdrop of ferment in Europe. Earthly crowned heads were falling, and in their place new and ominous figures were rising; Stalin had just taken power, Hitler had published *Mein Kampf*, and Mussolini was in control of Italy. The Pope was making a statement not about the shape of the liturgical year, but about the real source of power and the real nature of power. The relevance of that call and world's failure to hear it is reflected in one final anniversary worth mentioning; for this is also the 60th anniversary, to the very day, of the commencement of the Nuremberg War Trials.

Power remains a great challenge for us. Eighty years after Pope Pius' decree we are still surrounded by ferment, even if its specifics are different. For some Osama Bin Laden is the new Hitler, while for others it is George W. Bush. The trials are presently not at Nuremberg but in Guantanamo Bay, in a dubious exercise of discretion that seeks to pre-empt violence as much as to punish it, but which raises disturbing questions about means and methods: can peace be guarded by war, or justice by injustice?

Closer to home, we face not only our own counter-terrorism initiatives, but controversial proposals for industrial relations which would re-cast power relationships for many employers and employees, offering incentives and improvements for some, but leaving others - and probably those already the powerless and most vulnerable - like sheep before wolves, unless employers do more than the law will require.

In these and other dilemmas, the call to be good citizens is hard enough; the call to be Christ's Church may be even harder. Across 150 years, many men and women who have worshipped here at Christ Church have sought to express and to live that challenge and that commitment. And our best and truest honour to them, looking forward into the next 150 years, is to face the same questions and give our best answers for the future. How to be a Church which is Christ's, in which Christ reigns, is as crucial as it is difficult.

To say that "Christ is King" is relatively easy. To know what it means, let alone what it demands, is much harder. Abroad in the Church there is a surprising amount of "King" talk, given these all-but

republican times. The best-selling music of Hillsong Church, for instance, is peppered with regal images: its song titles include “Shout to the King”, “King of Majesty”, “Prayer to the King”, “Glory to the King” – but none of the lyrics of these songs seem to say anything about what kind of King Jesus is, except that he is, well - a very *kingly* King.

In other corners of contemporary Christianity, the benign but vacuous in talk of Christ’s kingship gives way to the vicious. Next to Hillsong products on the shelves of the average “Christian” bookstore, we might find the *Left Behind* novels, a series of paperbacks ghostwritten for US fundamentalist teacher Tim LaHaye. These tell of the future one might dream up from a bad but all-too typical misinterpretation of NT eschatology, in which Christ returns in power in the world of the 21st century. The worst feature of these books, which have been prominent in the NT Times best-seller lists in recent years, is not their familiar simplistic predictions of end-time events, but the character of the Christ they portray returning.

For this King slaughters his enemies, and his pulp-fiction literary interpreters portray his majestic violence more graphically and gleefully than I would wish to share with you here today. Such a Christ is a war criminal of the future, who would escape his own Nuremberg only because he is too powerful to be captured. This is no messiah – he is the very devil.

Generations of Christians here have known Christ’s reign not as unfettered power, but as that of a shepherd who cares for the lost sheep, and is himself one of them, sharing their life. His kingdom is grace for the despondent, and mercy for the sinner, and peace for the troubled. Will this Christ survive and witness here for another 150 years? It will not be enough to keep the doors open; we must remember, in the face of strident voices that speak otherwise, exactly whom we serve.

To speak of Christ as King means not that we imbue Christ with every attribute we otherwise associate with absolute power; it means that we understand power – true power - to be everything we know about Christ. The character of his kingship, including its element of judgment, is expressed in the parable from today’s Gospel; we are to see and serve the King in the poor, the hungry, the sick, the imprisoned – in the poor person on the minimum wage, and in the prisoner at Baxter or Guantanamo Bay.

Our hope, like the hope of those whose prayers have made this place holy for so long, is for the peaceable kingdom of Christ, the reign of his love. Its end is reconciliation, and joy, justice, and peace; for the true future of that coming King is this: that “the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”