**CHRIST THE KING Ascension 25.11.2018 John 18.33-37**

For 1500 years, Passover had been the holiest day of the sacrifice and eating of Passover lamb. By pausing, Israel remembered how God had preserved alive the Hebrew first-born in the time of Egyptian slavery.

At Passover in 33 CE, the Roman prefect, Pilate, asked the people “Shall I crucify your king Jesus?” only to hear the faithless religious miscreants trumpet with devastating irony, “We have no king but the emperor.” That day, the religious leaders wanted a special Passover Lamb sacrificed, Jesus, the Lamb of God.

Truth is stranger than fiction, for, as a part of his torture, brute soldiers flogged Jesus, then crushed a thorny wreath into the captive’s head. Pilate then presented to the baying mob, this bloody mass, dressed in royal purple, with the taunting words “Here is your king.”

Later, when crucified on Mount Calvary, Pilate placed a mocking inscription above the sacred head sore wounded, telling it was “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” Unwittingly, and for all history, the pagan Pilate made the kingship of Jesus permanent. Until then, only a Roman Caesar could crown a King of the Jews.

In happier days, disciple Nathanael had once declared “Rabbi, You are the King of Israel.” Word was out. There was a new king on the block.

At his kangaroo court, Pilate was curious about what Jesus had done to engender such hostility.

When Pilate asked “Are you the King of the Jews?” it was not his concern if Jesus was a religious fanatic or the anointed One of God. You could almost hear the scorn in the prefect’s voice “You! the King of the Jews! Yeah! And the Blues will win the flag next season!” But, Pilate would be concerned if Jesus was a new political leader, one who might challenge Roman rule in his patch. With cruel use of force, Pilate had crucified many such challengers to Rome in this very volatile province.

Rather than Jesus being put on trial by Pilate, it is Jesus, the eloquent Word of God, who took charge of the interrogation, “Do you ask/ am I a king/ on your own or did others tell you about me?” Read: “The nasties want me dead for allegedly breaking their outworn and effete religious laws. They have no power to put me to death. They are relying on you to kill me today.”

“Yes, I am a king, but I pose no threat to Rome. In years to come, Rome will fall to my followers, without their resorting to violence. Worldly kings take power by the slaughter of other kingly powers. My kingdom is not like that. It is unlike any other. My kingdom is non-political, non-violent, non-revolutionary. It can hardly affect national security. My kingdom represents all those things which the world does not stand for, but which, deep down, longs for all that is right, true and beautiful. You have thousands of soldiers to call on; I have not one soldier to call on. I am a king who entered my city days ago astride a donkey, not a war charger. I am a king come to lift up the lowly and the neglected, unlike those impotent religious leaders. I am a king who serves, rather than being served. I am a king who demonstrates power through weakness, who manifests strength through vulnerability, who establishes justice through mercy. I am a king hopefully held in the memory of 5000 famished folk I once fed.

I have come as a king so that folk may have life, and have it to abundance.

I am a king who built my kingdom by choosing to embrace a confused, chaotic world, taking its pain into my own body, perhaps to die the death it seeks, to rise again, to remind all that light is stronger than darkness, that love is stronger than hate and that, with God, all good things are possible. My kingdom does belong in this world in that its followers do have a role to play but, never as powerbrokers defending their own kingdoms of political or religious power.

Pilate had power to coerce others to do his will; Jesus had quiet authority and influence, but without coercion. Pilate was standing in the presence of Truth embodied. He had just been counselled by the ultimate personification of Truth’

In his callous heart, Pilate knows the truth that Jesus is innocent. Will he respond to the truth of Jesus’ kingship and free him? No, all that the emperor’s representative can whimper is “What is Truth?” He can only see things from a this-worldly perspective. For Pilate, the only place you get truth is to unsheathe a sword. We would say “out of the barrel of a gun.”

Pilate was trapped by forces larger than he could imagine. Truth will not influence his behaviour. He will choose to take the way of evasion and cowardice.

The accusers made it clear that they could not enter the pagan Roman Praetorium on Passover eve, lest they pollute themselves. If unclean, they could not partake of the lamb sacrifice. The nasties wanted to remain ceremonially clean to eat the lamb, yet, how could they keep their ritual purity by condemning to death the true Lamb of God, who was in their midst, the very Lamb who could make then cleaner than clean?

Pilate conceded respect for their holy day instead of compelling the accusers to come into the unclean hall of judgement to face their accused.

Pilate began to slip into their grip, doomed by their political machinations, as he tried and failed to sit on the fence. He wished to release Jesus, for lack of evidence, but their bullied threat to delate him to Rome, led unwittingly to the fulfilling of God’s plan to be worked out on Calvary hill.

At Passover noon, the precise hour when the lambs were sacrificed, the chief priests declared that they were better friends of the emperor than Pilate. Frightened by them, he put to them a dastardly public opinion poll, to choose a rapist and murderer, Barabbas, and the emperor, as their king instead of Jesus. A bad choice, for, in thirty years hence, a similar ‘friendly’ emperor will level Jerusalem and erase all its inhabitants, especially the priests.

Jesus the Truth, took the death that would otherwise have fallen on the brigand. Truth was Jesus dying for Barabbas, and for Israel, and for the world, and for you and for me.

Do our allegiances to worldly powers in the kingdom of nothingness ever cause us to deny Christ’s kingship, even unawares?

Do we ever become imbued with little concern for the building of the community guided by love and truth at Ascension?

Or, do we live in the reign of Christ the servant King, and, like him, do we seek to serve, rather than to be served?

Do we reach out to the least and the lost, and, Jesus like, wash feet to give life to the parish community, so that it may give life?

At our ending, may we say, with the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, “It is finished. Mission accomplished?”

Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory.