

Sermon for Good Friday

The Text: John 18

Every empire, every country, every kingdom has its monuments to power.

A flag may represent a country and be a symbol of instant recognition to its people, but there's nothing quite like a monument to demonstrate your power.

Their purpose is to impress the local citizens and display that nation's power to the world, impressing and even intimidating others. If a powerful nation is vanquished, the conquerors show their might by destroying, defacing, or covering the impressive monuments with their flags. Better still is to capture them and make them the monuments of the victorious country.

When Jesus ushered in the Kingdom of God he also established a monument to its power. But it wasn't when he fed the 5000, though that was a powerful sign of his Kingdom. And it wasn't unveiled at the Sea of Galilee even though he calmed the storm there and walked across the water. He didn't establish his monument when he cast out demons, or when he healed the sick, and raised the dead to life, though these were also powerful signs of his kingdom. And he didn't establish his monument when he preached to people and taught them about God, though these were also powerful signs of his kingdom.

By the time Jesus stood on trial before Pontius Pilate, he still had not unveiled the monument to his powerful kingdom. Jesus' first words in Mark's Gospel make it clear that Jesus is all about ushering in his kingdom: 'Behold, the Kingdom of Heaven is near', he says. And he preached and taught about the Kingdom time and again. But Pilate's familiarity with the pomp and ceremony of Roman power must have made it hard for him to take the claims about Jesus' kingdom and about Jesus being a king very seriously. There had been plenty of excitement and enthusiasm for Jesus but there were no monuments and there hadn't been any parades—Palm Sunday was hardly an impressive show of strength. Perhaps that's why Jesus seemed like such an unlikely threat to Pilate. But Pilate's curiosity got the better of him and he just had to ask Jesus, 'Are you the king of the Jews?'

What Pilate didn't realise was that Jesus, the king, was about to unveil the monument to the power of his kingdom. Only hours later Jesus would carry this monument on his own—there's no mention of any help coming from Simon of Cyrene in John's account. Jesus marches it to the hill, erects the monument, is enthroned upon it as king...and dies.

When he answers Pilate's question, Jesus makes it clear to Pilate and to us just how distinctly different his kingdom is from any other. 'My kingdom is not of this world,' he says.

Jesus' kingdom really is different to any other. The kingdom of God has an unmistakable monument—the Cross. The power of God's Kingdom is revealed and displayed in the

Cross, in the suffering and sacrificial death of the King. This is a very different king; and his is a very different kingdom.

Like lost refugees we have been accepted and adopted into the Kingdom of God. And thank God for that for it was totally his doing. Do you remember the words that Jesus said to Nicodemus, Israel's great teacher? "No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born from above; unless they are born of water and the Spirit." We were lost and lonely spiritual refugees living in a kingdom without hope. But by virtue of our baptism God has made us citizens of his kingdom, the kingdom of God.

Even still, this kingdom is new to us. We know the ways of the old kingdom much better, the ways of the world. In Australia we are a diverse people. People have been born, raised and died in the same place. Others have experienced different places in their country of birth, others still were born in foreign countries and have now made Australia their home. Some of us have experienced life in other countries before returning home. If you have ever experienced life in a different culture you will know that it's different. We even have different cultures in our own country. The Top End is different to Tasmania. The West Coast are different from the East Coast. Most of us have felt like foreigners for a while and know that it can take quite a few adjustments to feel at home.

As citizens of the Kingdom of God we can also feel like foreigners because this kingdom is just so different. We are citizens of the Kingdom of God—we are new creations—and therefore we are called to respond differently. In the Kingdom of God a conflict represents opportunities to show the power of the Kingdom: it is an opportunity to love others—that's what the King said to do and what he did himself, even unto death. It is an opportunity to forgive others—because that's the reality the King brought about for us on the Cross. It is an opportunity for our faith to grow and it is an opportunity to glorify God, get the log out of our own eye, and gently restore people with whom we are having conflict, and finally go and be reconciled.

Every one of those actions is empowered by Jesus, the King. Every one of those actions is a sign of the Kingdom—the Cross—as we lay down our own lives and bring love and forgiveness to others.

But our assimilation into the Kingdom of God as new citizens often falters. We are used to the ways of the world. We want results. We want them now. We want things to move. We want things to change. Sometimes we forget that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed—it looks small and seemingly insignificant. Sometimes we forget that the Kingdom of God is like yeast working away invisibly in the dough. Sometimes we forget that the Kingdom of God is like scattering seeds all over the place and seeing where the crops grow.

And sometimes we don't just forget. We just get sick of it. We want the bread to rise now; the mustard tree now; the crops now. The power of the cross to forgive sins, to change lives, to reconcile people with God...we know it's good. But sometimes it's just too slow. It's too hard to measure. It doesn't seem very powerful at all. It seems a waste of time.

And for that reason the monument of the Kingdom of God—the Cross—has not always been the monument of the church. In every church of every denomination, citizens of

the Kingdom of Heaven have from time to time replaced the true monument of the Kingdom of God with something else.

We all do it. The power of the Cross is just so foreign to us. We know the power of the world much better—that imposing, impressive kind of power. The disciples pointed out the temple to Jesus and said: “Look teacher, what massive stones! What magnificent buildings!” But Jesus responded by saying: “Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; everyone will be thrown down.” Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world. Impressive buildings, wealth and power, political clout and even people in pews at church are not the monuments of Jesus’ kingdom. If they are legitimate gifts that God gives us, well and good. But if they become necessary parts of who we are as citizens of the kingdom of God then we make them our monuments and substitute the Cross.

Every time we demand something and put ourselves first we replace the Cross with our own monuments. Every time we use the church, or the bible to further our own ends and gain power over somebody else, we replace the Cross as our monument. When we refuse to forgive, when we refuse to repent, when we let hate and pride and bickering come between us and other people, or between us and God, we look to seize power for ourselves and replace the Cross as our monument.

‘My kingdom is not of this world’ said Jesus. The monument of Jesus’ kingdom is the Cross. And it is a monument to true power—the Cross is not a monument to meek submission and defeat, despite how it may appear. The Cross was the place of Jesus’ great victory, where he defeated the power of sin and Satan and won eternal life for all who believe in him. The Cross is the place where powerless refugees like us are brought into God’s kingdom. The Cross is the only place where people can be made righteous and where they can find peace with God. The Cross makes it possible to find joy in suffering. The Cross makes it possible to forgive those who have wronged us. Paul says in Romans, “The kingdom of God... is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

That power cannot be matched or imitated by any kingdom of the world. When we live as citizens of the kingdom, when God’s Spirit works within us to live as new creations, God’s kingdom comes. It comes to the people with whom we live and work. It cultivates trees that grow from tiny seeds into plants with huge branches for others to find some rest and shade.

But the greatest power of the Cross is the power of forgiveness. Jesus forgives us, his wayward citizens, time and again. And in Holy Communion the spoils of his victory are distributed for all his people, where the forgiveness of sins won on the Cross is given to all in his body and blood.

As we anticipate Jesus’ glorious coming we continue to eat this victory meal. We continue to live in his grace by the power of the Holy Spirit. And we continue to keep the Cross as the monument of his kingdom till he comes in such a glorious way that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Heavenly Father, may your Kingdom come, even in and among us. Amen.