

Transferred Into His Kingdom
Christ the King
Colossians 1: 11-20
21 November 2010

The recent commercial success of the film *Avatar* had more to do with the special effects and 3 D imaging than the rather cheesy plot line. Just in case you didn't get to see it, it is all about a space soldier who sees the light when tasked with infiltrating the indigenous inhabitants of a planet who are giving grief to the recently arrived resource development company from earth. When he comes to see that his employers are a bunch of planet rapers he goes over to the other side, marries their warrior Princess, and leads a rebellion to save the local eco system.

Amongst scriptwriters this is called the sleeping with the enemy gambit. A parallel movie story line would be Kevin Costner's *Dancing with Wolves* about a US Cavalryman who goes native and comes to see life with the Plains Indians as a better bet, even if means getting radically off side with his former compadres.

The hook in these kinds of stories is the notion of two radically different societies living side by side, each with a fierce claim on the loyalty of its tribal group, and the attracting power that draws a true believer from one community to the other. We are left wondering – what would it take for me to want to join some group that I presently consider to be not at all my cup of tea – and even more interesting – what would the world look like from the completely opposite point of view of that bunch of people over there who at present appear to be my enemies?

It takes a transition figure to help characters across the dividing line between one group and the other in these kinds of stories. In Hollywood movies it is usually the love interest who functions in this role. Today we celebrate a different kind of transition figure, and a different kind of worlds in opposition story.

He has taken us out of the power of darkness and created a place for us in the kingdom of the Son that he loves, and in him, we gain our freedom, the forgiveness of sins.

The Christians at Colossae are new believers in a recently formed gentile Church. Maybe they are only 25 people meeting in a back room, but apparently they are quite central in God's plans for the world. And the language that is used to describe the content and style of this new style of community living makes it clear that it is dear to God's heart, the most precious part of his creation, and somehow it's way of being is directly tied up with the character and personality of God's Son. He who was recently the fully realised representative of

God's new beginning for humanity in an individual human existence, has now taken up residence in the Church in a new modality of existence. He is its head, and it is his body. Now they are in the business of growing in to this new social reality in which the very texture of their life together is an expression of this collective entity called Jesus Christ.

But to get to that level of fellowship they must make some transitions. It means moving away from the power of darkness and locating themselves in the new political and social reality that is called the kingdom of the Son. Or rather they are being taken out of the power of darkness and are having a space opened up for them in a different world ruled over by the Son.

The early Christians were clear about the authority claims being made on them by the central figure in their new religion. Jesus was given the title *Kyrios* or *Lord*, and it meant what it said. He had the ultimate claim on their lives. It was to Him that they owed the highest loyalty. The acid test of this came to be refusing to give the Roman Emperor this same title acknowledgement and loyalty, and being prepared to suffer judicial murder as a way of making the distinction clear.

So this could be a costly rule to live under. Those who object to today's feast of Christ the King as a throw back to forgotten feudal forms of governance, an echo of the days when Christendom had a close tie up between throne and altar, have missed the point. Becoming a Christian means agreeing to give Jesus Christ your glad obedience so as to come under his liberating rule. And since Christianity is an intensely community minded affair in which the community represents Jesus himself that means we agree to give that community a high degree of authority over our lives.

Did I say liberating rule? That can seem like a contradiction to many because since the era of the enlightenment obedience and loyalty has come to be seen as the virtues of dogs. But the rule of Jesus Christ over us was and is essential if we are to break out of the enslavements and divisions that plague our world.

One recent commentator has called the early Church "a sociological miracle." It was made up of diverse culture and language groups who often feared, mistrusted and hated one another. In the case of the Jew/Gentile division it was a contrast between those patronised and scorned the Jews, and those who excluded the Gentiles from any significant human contact. This miracle of reconciled living could only occur because Jesus Christ required the nonsense of division to stop, and because Christian believers put loyalty to his community expression the Church ahead of the bigotry that they absorbed with their mother's milk.

But an even more fundamental break has to be made with the predicament of the human condition if we are to get with the programme of Christian living. In the film *The Matrix* the central protagonist is led by degrees to see that the world he lives in isn't made up of people walking around the streets going to their jobs and their families, but is rather a nightmare world of human life forms being battery farmed for their physic energy by the robotic intelligences that got ahead and took over from their human creators. This is a useful way in to thinking about what the New Testament calls *the power of darkness*, and it's associated destructive rule of sin over human affairs.

Living as we do in a well-regulated and peaceful society we can be inclined to dismiss this analysis of the human condition. But what about the regular news stories that we hear and see of self-destructive and cruel behaviour for no apparent reason? And what about our sad and regretful reflections on shameful things we were involved in earlier parts of our lives? These are the surface expressions of a deeper malaise that the human race can't get itself out of by its own efforts.

The King who rules from a tree indicates the road out of the nightmare kingdom of darkness. In Luke's dialogue between Jesus and the two thieves crucified with him we see a Jesus, who though not yet ascended to his place of Kingly rule, is yet already granting a royal pardon to one who wants to be under his kingly rule in his kingdom.

Augustine of Hippo had an acute psychological insight into all the ways that we are enemies to our own happiness, and are enslaved by sin in even our best attempts to be good people. His solution was that we should find our freedom by giving ourselves in glad obedience to the one whose commands give life. Anglican prayer book collects are full of this Augustinian sense of freedom. I am going to finish with one of my favourites:

*Almighty God, you alone can bring order
to our unruly wills and affections;
give us grace to love what you command
and desire what you promise,
that in all the changes and chances
of this uncertain world,
our hearts may surely there be fixed
where true joys are to be found;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*