

Christ the King

St. Brandon's

Daniel 7:9-10,13-14, Ps 93; John 18:33-37

21 November 2021

Last week, on Remembrance Sunday, Anna used the work 'provoke' or 'provocation' as a common theme connecting the various parts of her sermon. Following suit today, my word is 'provisional'. Perhaps other preachers over the following weeks might continue the theme – it might prove to be providential to do so (sorry)!

But why 'provisional'? Well, if we start with our gospel reading, I think what we see there is a scene that is, in a sense, all rather provisional – provisional in the sense of being short-term, interim, impermanent, uncertain. If we put out of our minds that we know the outcome, then we are faced with this 'trial' of Jesus by Pilate, on trumped up charges, which could go either way. Pilate, to be fair, is trying to establish the facts of the case – "Are you the King of the Jews?" – to which Jesus seems to give him a rather paradoxical 'yes and no' kind of answer. There's no closure to the conversation at this point, nor when in the following section (beyond today's passage) the Jews follow through on their accusations with the ironic statement – "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has claimed to be the Son of God" (19:7). Pilate questions Jesus again about that, again seems to get a paradoxical answer, but wants nonetheless to release him (19:12). It might still go either way. As the conversations and accusations go to and fro the outcome is in some doubt until the last minute. It's all provisional and uncertain. But then, as we know, the cries of the Jews, demanding crucifixion, prevail. A great injustice is done, and it ends in torture and death and apparent defeat for all that Jesus was and stood for.

And yet all that Jesus says in response to Pilate, while somewhat paradoxical, is not provisional. In effect, he says simply, 'Yes I am a king, but my kingship and kingdom are not like the kind of kingship and kingdom that you are familiar with here on earth'. And he then introduces a sense of destiny, and a sense of fundamental value into the conversation: "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice". In other words, there is truth as such, truth in Jesus, truth in God, that are fundamental not provisional. But Pilate cannot cope with that: "What is truth?", he replies (18:18), making it all rather provisional and uncertain again.

How does the world feel to you? All rather provisional – short-term, interim, impermanent, uncertain? Covid, Brexit, climate change, inequality, social and racial injustice, terrorism all at the 'big' level, making it very difficult to predict what sort of world, what sort of society we are headed for. At an inter-personal level, perhaps relationships with friends or within families that are under pressure, which might turn out well but might not, with all the uncertainty associated with that. At a personal level, perhaps uncertainties around employment, housing, health or mortality staring us in the face. Perhaps you are facing or have been on the receiving end of an injustice. It might feel all rather provisional and uncertain – things could change dramatically, and for the worse, as they did for Jesus.

And that's for us living in a relatively stable, relatively affluent society. What about those in Afghanistan with a collapsed economy and broken banking system facing mass famine this winter?

Or the migrants who were recently at the Belarusian border trying to get into Poland, apparently pawns in a political game? Or ... well I could go on, as could you no doubt. Life for them is provisional and uncertain and unjust in a way that probably dwarfs most of the issues we face.

Well, let's leave all that for a moment, and turn to our other reading from Daniel. What is the very dramatic scene that is painted there telling us? And, in stark contrast to the gospel reading, there is absolutely nothing provisional here. We can make the assumption that Daniel has been given a true vision of the end times. Of God the Father as the Ancient One taking His throne. Of Jesus as "one like a human being (or, indeed, "one like a son of man" – Jesus's own chosen description of Himself) coming with the clouds of heaven", and of Jesus being given dominion and glory and kingship, with a dominion that is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and a kingship that shall never be destroyed. This is not provisional – it is not short-term, interim, impermanent, uncertain but for everlasting, permanent, indestructible. There is a certainty here that seems to resolve all the uncertainties of this world. This is the kingship and the kingdom that Jesus was trying to tell Pilate about, where all that is provisional and uncertain and broken here is resolved in a way that was beyond Pilate's and the Jews', and quite possibly our, imagination. A kingdom where all creation is reconciled to God in Christ.

And yes, in order to achieve that resolution of all things, that reconciliation of all things, there is judgement here. Judgement of all that has been wrong, all that has contributed to the provisionality of the world as we experience it, including a judgement of us and our lives. Fire is the element that accompanies deity, and the stream of fire which issued and flowed out of the presence of the Ancient One is a source of both light and purification – shedding light on all that is wrong, but also cleansing it in the process.

So while we should be in fear and awe of this reckoning, for us and for all, we can also hold onto the hope of the end of the provisionality, the short-term nature, the impermanence, the uncertainty and the injustice of the world as we experience it. It will be resolved, reconciliation will happen, Christ the King will come, and come not only for us but for those, like those in Afghanistan and Belarus recently and so on, who are suffering so dreadfully at the moment.

But there's one final thing that's worth noting, between our two passages as it were. While holding to this hope, we also need to note the way in which the Jesus who stood before Pilate became the one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And He was not plucked by God the Father out of His predicament, and presented in glory before Him. He was not rescued by more than twelve legions of angels (Matt. 26:53). His route to dominion and glory and kingship was via the cross.

This is not to say that we should simply accept all the provisionality and uncertainty and injustices of this world. We should try to put right all the hardships and injustices of this life, both for ourselves and others. But we also need to accept that the provisionality and uncertainty and injustices we experience are a fact of life, and not expect that God will necessarily pluck us out of them, or rescue us from them. But what we can hold onto is that, in the providence of God, both the struggle against and the experience of provisionality and uncertainty, of injustice and hardship, will ultimately be resolved, as all things are reconciled to God in Christ the King. That is the ultimate hope of our faith.

Amen