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Christ the King

Sermon notes on 2 Samuel 23.1-7

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The recently appointed Professor of Worship and Preaching at Melbourne's Uniting Church theological college was spotted not long ago wearing a T-shirt which declared "Jesus loves you" and then, underneath and in slightly smaller text, "*but I'm his favourite.*" Now, I know the man in question well enough *almost* to be certain that he wears his T-shirt as a joke and for the response it gets, and not as statement of some eternal truth! For we all know that God doesn't have favourites. Or, we know this, as long as we don't read the Bible and discover that in fact it seems that he does.

We've heard from the second book of Samuel this morning what are purported to be the last words of David, which ran like this:

The oracle of David, son of Jesse,
the oracle of the man whom God
exalted,
the anointed of the God of Jacob,
the favourite of the Strong One of
Israel:
The spirit of the LORD speaks through me,
his word is upon my tongue.
The God of Israel has spoken,
the Rock of Israel has said to me...

What are we to make of such divine favouritism? For, while we might find ways of explaining away this particular text on account of its antiquity or cultural context or whatever, the theme of God's favouritism won't go away. While our 2 Samuel text focuses on the special standing of David before God, today the liturgical calendar reaches its end with a focus on the special standing of *Jesus* in the declaration that "Christ is King". The language of kingship has caused problems for many today, for a number of reasons. "Kingship" is identified as a masculine, militarist and hierarchical concept and so, many argue, not one particularly useful for conveying the character either of Jesus or of the God who sent him. Add to this that we don't really know what a king is anymore, and the confession of Christ as king feels to be a fairly unhelpful one these days.

But it is not the theme of "king" or its connotations which is really the problem we strike in today's festival, but the fact that – then and now – there are *many* kings (and many queens). We see this in the question Pilate put to Jesus: "...are you *a* king, then?" Why this one man as *the* king among all kings? Put differently, How is it possible that the man Jesus can have attached to him such an extraordinary list of appellations as we hear in Revelation 1.4b-8: the

faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth? The Revelation text declares what the rest of the New Testament also preaches, that this Jesus who stood before Pilate as you or I might also have done is the particular point at which God touches the world. He is, we might say, God's favourite. All that matters comes down to this *one*.

Now this is, of course, a patently ridiculous suggestion – at least to Melbournians, who will host both an international parliament of religions and an international atheism convention in the next few months. At neither gathering will the suggestion that God has favourites be welcome, and it's not particularly welcome in the churches these days either. Is it not so much more clearly the case that the "one" which matters is "God", who favours no particular place but in his omnipresence is also omni- and equi-gracious? This now seems clear to us because we've seen that any hint of divine favouritism is extraordinarily dangerous in the hands of arrogant human beings. It is theories of divine favouritism which have fuelled so much destruction among us; "Gott mit uns", "In God we trust", or that unholy trinity: "God, King and Country" are but three slogans which particular groups of peoples have wrapped around their sense that *they* are the chosen ones. What fuels the diatribe of modern popular atheism is not merely the alleged irrationality of religious belief but the sheer destruction which can spring from those who believe themselves to be God's favourites. In the hands of the Church, Jesus as "special" has proven no less a danger in this respect. Favourites divide and division brings harm, which is why Grandma knows never to have favourites – or, at least, never to declare them!

And yet, the language of favourite is implied and used in the Scriptures for Israel-in-David-to-Jesus, without apology. More scandalously, this favouritism is not of the kind which allows us others at least to be left alone in our unfavoured ordinariness. God's favouritism in David, and finally in Jesus, is something we must take heed of, for it is not only about them but about us on the "outside" also.

It seems a good thing, of course, that we know better than all this these days. We've seen how the particularities of history muddy the waters and bring strife and death. We've seen how human beings have claimed "God's" favouritism for themselves, and employed the rhetoric of divine blessing and call as justification of all kinds

of destruction. And so there are, *for us*, no divine favourites – or, at least, if there are any there is a *bunch* of them, the number of which happens to correspond to the number of different types of religious systems and affections we recognise. Everyone may have their favourites so as they don't impinge upon the favourites of others.

And yet, a community which confesses (to the extent that it does...) the Incarnation ought to know something else about how God works in the world. For the point of the doctrine of the Incarnation is not only that God enters into the world but that God *can* do, and so *thoroughly*, and still remain God. The "Word becomes flesh" – and is now *both* Word and *flesh*. Fleshly, fallen things – even "God-forsaken" things – are all potential means by which God might work in the world. Things marked by human disorder are ready and sufficient instruments for God's healing works. Human favouritism is a divisive and deadly thing but it is precisely this deathly thing which God uses to heal. For divine favouritism reworks what brings division and death in human favouritism and makes it an *enlivening* thing.

The test of *Christian* faith is not whether or not we can convince ourselves that God "exists"; there is nothing particularly Christian about that. The test is whether or not we believe that the instruments of death might yet prove to be used by God to bring life, quite contrary to the intention or expectations of those of us who are so adept at applying such deathly devices. Not for nothing, then, is the cross central to Christian belief, for it is on the cross that God's power-as-faithfulness is put to its final test God's capacity to remain God to a broken world, which is to say: God's capacity to heal.

Now, none of this is to justify human weakness and failure; it is simply to speak of what might yet be done with us by such a God. But notice how favouritism takes on a different guise in the hands of this God. Just as the church declares that Jesus bears the divine judgement, that no body else has to; and just as we declare that Jesus bears the loss of God in abandonment to death, that no one else any longer has to bear that loss, so we can also say that Jesus is God's favourite, that no one else *has* to be. That is, when *this* God takes a favourite, it is not in order to relegate all others to a lower order, but to free them from any *need* to be, or to seek to be, God's favourites. *Jesus* is "King", that no other has to be. This is the character of his kingship: an exaltation which lifts up us all.

With us, favouritism implies division, and what divides only kills; for *God* what we divide with our favourites also kills – even God himself. But that gospel is that for God there is *also* nothing

which cannot be an instrument of healing unto life in his hands. To declare that Jesus is God's favourite or, in different ways, David, or Israel, or even (God forbid?!) the Church are such favourites – is to declare *not* that we or anyone else outside those circles are not God's favourites, but simply that we and they don't *need* to be. When it comes to this particular God, I am blessed enough, in that he favours another.

Is there not good news in that for we who labour and are heavy laden by many burdens, whether the burden of our own dreams for our lives, or that of anxiety for the future of the church, or worry about the future of society and world? For these are, at root, worries about whether or not God favours us. Yet, whatever we might choose to do about those things the kingship of Christ means that we know that we are not responsible for building up a kingdom, for this has already been done. God has chosen a kingdom and a king, and it is not our kingdom or our crown.

We are then freed to give, to love, to serve, to forgive, free simply to be ourselves when that is the best we can manage, or to become something extraordinary when the Spirit falls; for our hope is that, in the end, all that will really matter is what God does with us and for us. In Christ, God's favourite, God has favoured me. I am blessed in that God has blessed Jesus of Nazareth.

For such a hope and the liberated lives it makes possible here and now, all thanks be to God, now and forever. Amen.