

7 May 2023

Acts 7:55-60  
1 Peter 2:2-10  
John 14:1-14

Reading John 14 and 1 Peter 2 alongside the coronation of King Charles the Third prompts some fresh thinking on these very familiar texts (John 14 particularly). In common with his predecessors over the nearly 500 years since Henry the Eighth, Charles will take the title of Defender of the Faith.<sup>1</sup>

Almost 30 years ago, Charles triggered an uproar when he indicated his intention that he would be “defender of faith” in general, rather than “defender of *the* faith”. Actually, before I checked, my faulty recollection was that he had declared he would be “defender of *faiths*”. This came flooding back to me when I read again those familiar words of Jesus in John 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” You see, it has often been a criticism that Christianity claims to be an exclusive faith, “*the* way, *the* truth, *the* life”, and that exclusive claim makes people uncomfortable. It is the same kind of discomfort that arises when people consider that the King’s title of “defender of the faith” implies that Christianity, or maybe only Anglicanism within it, is the only true faith.

Many today are concerned that these words seem to be arrogant, intolerant, and exclusive. Stoning is thankfully not part of our contemporary New Zealand experience, but a metaphorical stoning – an outpouring of contempt and efforts to silence them – is the experience of increasing numbers of Christians who try to make strong faith claims.

And I’d agree that Jesus’ words can be *employed* in an arrogant and intolerant way. They have been used by people trying to claim a religious superiority; they have been used to justify hateful violence; they have been used to avoid dialogue and careful listening to others. We, the worldwide Church, must repent of such behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> On this matter, the articles by Morris and Sherwood are well worth reading; as is the full liturgy of the coronation service, with explanatory commentary. (See sources at the end of this document)

But the claim in itself is neither arrogant nor intolerant.<sup>2</sup>

If I were to come up with the only known cure for a deadly disease, I am not being exclusive if I claim to have it. I'd be exclusive if I withheld it from others.

We need to remember that he who makes the claim to be *the way* is the One whose intention is fully inclusive – the way is open to all who would accept it. This claim that is taken to be an abuse of power is made by the One who chose, not the way of power, but the way of humble suffering.

And this becomes all the more clear when we consider the context within which Jesus makes his declaration. The declaration comes as part of Jesus' dialogue with his disciples at the meal he shared in the Upper Room with his disciples before he went to his death.

In the account of that occasion in John 13 the focus is on matters other than the sharing of food. Jesus first displays his great humility as he washes his disciples' feet, and sets the action before them as an example of servant leadership. He tells them to love one another as he has loved them. He goes on to predict his betrayal, and then to say that Peter will disown him three times. He tells them that he will not be with them much longer, and is going to a place they cannot (at least for now). The whole scene is shadowed by dark events on the horizon.

The way Jesus becomes *the way* is precisely through the route of humility, rejection, suffering and ultimately dying for those who offended against him – including us, and including those who haven't yet accepted him.

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To his perplexed and fearful disciples Jesus offers the comfort of assurance that he holds the future for them, that he provides in himself the way to the Father, so that they will be found in the place where God and human meet and dwell together. Once that meeting place had been the Temple in Jerusalem. Now, because of God's work in Jesus, that meeting place was to be found in Jesus himself.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion around this issue, see Keller, *The Reason*, pp.3-21

<sup>3</sup> Wright, *John*, p.58.

But this is not just about comfort; and this is not just focussed on our ultimate destination. It is also about purpose, and is thus about how we act now.

Last weekend I read a profile of Leader of the Opposition, Christopher Luxon, in *The Post*. In it there was a bit of discussion about his Christian faith, which some see as a problem, and which has been a source of some prickly interactions with journalists.

The article states:

He admits he does 'react to the label' when questioned in media interviews.

And he believes his beliefs were not a focus when he was a business leader, and so should not be in politics.

"I'm a Christian, I have a faith. I was raised in a Christian home, those values have never been a problem for me and my whole life," he says. "There's a separation of church and state. People shouldn't vote for me because I'm a Christian, and they shouldn't reject me because I am one."

But his values undergird his world view - and his policy prescription for how to fix its problems.<sup>4</sup>

It is profoundly disappointing that this kind of beat-up on faith occurs (and Luxon isn't the first and certainly won't be the last politician to face it), when there is no corresponding inspection of the worldviews of politicians who avow no faith, and no inspection of the implications of those alternative worldviews.

But my main point in mentioning this article lies in the last of the sentences I quoted: "his values undergird his world view - and his policy prescription for how to fix its problems."<sup>5</sup> The journalist's remark is a reflection of a very important Christian truth: if it means anything at all, our faith needs to show up in *action*, in what we *do*.

As Jesus continues to speak to his disciples he tells them, "Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Andrea Vance, "National Party leader Christopher Luxon is keeping the faith", *The Post*, 29 April 2023, <https://www.thepost.co.nz/a/politics/350003981/national-party-leader-christopher-luxon-keeping-faith>

<sup>5</sup> I'd actually turn it around: I think it is one's worldview that determines one's values

<sup>6</sup> John 12:12-14

Jesus continues to be at work in the world, drawing people into the family of God, through *us*, through his church working in his name as his representatives, empowered and equipped by him and in the light of his victory over death and enthronement with the Father.

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The other resonance between our readings and the coronation is found in 1 Peter: Peter writes of a “*royal priesthood*”.

This letter, by the same man who denied knowing Jesus before he went to his death on the cross, now riffs on temple themes in a way that shows that he has got the point of what Jesus was saying in the Upper Room before he died: Jesus is *the way*,<sup>7</sup> and the temple is being built within the redeemed people of God.

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house...

A “spiritual house”: here’s the Temple again, and this time it’s not Jesus alone; it’s *us with him!* The people of God are the true temple of God, the place where God dwells.<sup>8</sup>

Peter goes on to write of the purpose of this:

... you are a chosen people, a *royal priesthood*, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.<sup>9</sup>

This is a high calling indeed, and we are at risk of either feeling unworthy of it, or getting all puffed up with importance and arrogance. Neither is the appropriate response. We are worthy of it simply because God has chosen us for this, not because we have earned it or deserve it.

The purpose of it is that we may “declare the praises” of God; to declare his wonderful deeds, to proclaim the excellences (the perfections) of God. This we

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<sup>7</sup> See 1 Peter 2:7-8

<sup>8</sup> Grudem, *First Peter*, p.103

<sup>9</sup> 1 Peter 2:9

declare to a world that needs such good news. God's purpose in redeeming us is not simply our own enjoyment, but that we might glorify him. Seeking our own eternal well-being – right though that is – could never provide a truly satisfying goal for life. The answer to our search for ultimate meaning is ultimately not human-centred, but God-centred.<sup>10</sup> But, given the loving purposes of God, what is God-centred results in the properly flourishing of humankind.

The language of “royal priesthood” always makes me think of God's original intention for humanity, that we would be both kings and priests: kings as under-rulers for God, ruling creation for its wellbeing (the image of shepherd kings from last week comes to mind again) and to fulfil God's purposes for it; and priests as representatives of humanity towards God directing the worship of creation toward its Creator, and representing the Creator to the rest of creation. This is what it means to bear the image of God.<sup>11</sup>

And notice again that the intention of all this is radically *inclusive*, not exclusive.

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In an innovation at the beginning of Charles's coronation a young chorister greeted the King, saying

Your Majesty, as children of the Kingdom of God we welcome you in the name of the King of Kings.

To which the King responded,

In his name, and after his example, I come not to be served but to serve.

In the commentary in the order of service the following explanation was offered:

The Kingdom of God is not a place, but a way of being – a reign of justice, mercy, and love which Jesus came to bring. King of Kings is a title that is given to Jesus in the Bible. Christians profess the belief that He reigns for ever as ‘King of Kings’ and Lord of Lords. In this greeting, His Majesty's reply echoes the truth of Jesus Christ who came, not to wield power by force, but to

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<sup>10</sup> Grudem, *First Peter*, pp.111-112

<sup>11</sup> McKnight, *King Jesus*, pp.136-142

show the power of love.

This new inclusion marks the tone of the service from its beginning. The magnificence and beauty of the processions and costumes is a great celebration of tradition and joy. But behind the pageantry lies another message which the words and ceremonies to come will demonstrate – our King commits himself, through prayers and oaths, to follow the Lord he serves in a life of loving service as Monarch.<sup>12</sup>

We are a royal priesthood. You may not be anyone's monarch, but we all share a common calling with Charles, as followers of Christ the King of Kings, to offer a life of loving service for the sake of the world God made and loves.

#### Sources

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<sup>12</sup> [https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/23-24132%20Coronation%20Liturgy%20Commentary\\_04%20May.pdf](https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/23-24132%20Coronation%20Liturgy%20Commentary_04%20May.pdf) p.3 [The text of the commentary includes references for the Bible passages mentioned]