

# Anointed to Reign

*A sermon on Mark 1:4-11, Genesis 1:1-5 & Acts 19:1-7 by Nathan Nettleton, 10 January 2021*

© [LaughingBird.net](http://LaughingBird.net)

## Message

In baptism we are anointed to reign with Christ over a new creation, but it is a reign of suffering servanthood, not of reckless force.

## Sermon

The frightening and disturbing events in Washington D.C. this past week dramatically underlined the questions that have been becoming more and more insistent in American politics over the last four years, and arguably for many years before that. Questions particularly about the nature of true leadership and how it is exercised.

The United States of America has long claimed to be a beacon of democracy for the world. But one of the absolutely essential components of democracy is the consent of the loser. Democracy only works when everyone, including and perhaps especially those on the losing side, accept that they will be governed until the next election by those who win the election.

When you think about it, it is quite a remarkable thing, because elections in our country, and in the USA, are always very close. The losing minority are never very much less than half the population, and so if they refuse their consent, insurrection and civil war is a genuine possibility. In this case, 88 per cent of Trump voters say they don't believe that Biden legitimately won the election. That's an explosive situation, and this week we saw a president who was willing to play with matches while standing on that tinderbox. In his furious self-obsession, he was willing to toy with the possibility of civil war rather than concede and offer the consent on which democracy depends. People died as a result.

It is surprising that we were so shocked and surprised by this, because it was actually quite consistent with the way he has understood and practiced his leadership for the past four years. The other world leaders for whom he has shown the most admiration have been dictators and despots who similarly prioritise their own grip on power over the needs and desires of the ordinary people over whom they rule. Like them he has repeatedly expressed the view that the rules should be bent, broken or changed to suit his own interests, or the interests of those who have won his favour.

The very day when his supporters stormed the Capitol was the Feast of the Epiphany, a day when the followers of Jesus remember a story that includes a dangerous despotic king who was willing to dispatch death squads to kill babies rather than allow the rise of any risk to his power.

And now, just a few days later, on the Feast of the baptism of Christ, the readings we have heard have quite a lot to contribute to discussion of the nature of leadership and of leadership transitions. Two of the readings — from Mark's gospel and the Acts of the Apostles — speak explicitly about a transition of prophetic leadership from John the Baptist to Jesus. John proclaims that one greater than himself will come and baptise with a far more powerful baptism, a baptism with Holy Spirit. Can you imagine Donald Trump announcing that someone else is greater than him?

And in Acts, Paul calls on a group of believers who had previously been baptised by John to be baptised into the life of Christ, for their baptism at the hands of John had been something of a different nature from a time now past. A transition had come, and it was time to move into the new reality.

But there is more than this too. The language used in the accounts of Jesus being baptised by John is not just language of washing and changing of ways. The stories also use the language of the anointing of kings.

The ancient Hebrew kings were not crowned king; they were anointed king. Anointed with oil. And the words spoken from heaven as Jesus emerges from the water explicitly echo the words from Psalm 2 which were proclaimed over the new king during the coronation ceremony. So the identification of Jesus as God's beloved Son is not just a comment about his relationship to God, but about his relationship to God's creation and God's people. He is being anointed to reign as king.

The language also points back to something far earlier than the anointing of kings, and our attention is called to it by the third reading for today. When the voice from heaven says, "I am well pleased," we are prompted to recall the first stories of God being well pleased; the stories of creation.

God created. God saw that it was good. God was well pleased. And as we heard in our short extract from the creation stories, God begins with a formless void of watery chaos, and all that is created is, in a sense, called forth from baptismal water and declared pleasing to God. We even have reference to the Spirit brooding like a bird over the waters, just as we later hear of the Spirit appearing over the waters at Jesus' baptism, anointing him as he emerges from the waters.

In the baptism of Jesus, then, we are dealing with a new act of creation, with the birth of a new order. Of course, we more often use such language for the death and resurrection of Jesus, and say that a new creation was brought to birth in his dying and rising. But these ideas are not at odds with one another. Later in his gospel account, Mark reports that Jesus explicitly ties the two together when he confronts two disciples who are seeking to be anointed to leadership above their peers with the question, "Are you able to be baptised with the baptism that I am to be baptised with?" And when they say yes, he says that indeed they will be so baptised, but that the sort of leadership they are seeking is not something that he can or will give.

Here, in the confused request of the two disciples, we are dealing with the fundamental misunderstanding of Jesus that all these strands of imagery are addressing. The disciples are beginning to understand Jesus as the Messiah, the anointed one, the new king. But as they begin to grasp that reality, they begin to read into it all their old assumptions about what it might mean in practice.

They begin to respond on the assumption that, as a king, Jesus will elevate some and subjugate others and so, as the people around kings have always done, they begin to curry favour and jockey for position. Bound up with this is the assumption that to be higher up the pecking order is a pleasurable and desirable thing; for to possess such status and authority is to be enabled to wield great force and thus protect oneself from dangers and secure one's own

peace, comfort and interests. One of the reasons that Donald Trump has been able to behave as he has is that those in his own party who had the collective power to pull him into line were instead jockeying for position, trying to win his favour and his anointing for future power of their own.

“But,” says Jesus to the power-seeking disciples, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I must drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am to be baptised with?” For in this new creation, there is a new order of things. In this new creation, the new king does not reign by wielding force and maintaining the threat of violence to keep the peace. In this new creation, the king seeks peace, not by meeting violence with even greater force, but by offering himself as the target for the world’s violence, to absorb in his own body the full force of the world’s hatred and hostility, and to draw the sting out of it by refusing to co-operate with it or perpetuate it.

Jesus is the king who lays down his life for his people, for all people. And so the measure of one’s readiness for leadership in the body of Christ is not one’s ability to muster a majority vote, or intimidate rivals, or stack the courts, or prove one’s strength in a show of force. Rather it is in one’s readiness to suffer for the community, humbly absorbing hostility and bitterness and returning only reckless mercy and unflinching love. “Are you able to drink the cup that I must drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am to be baptised with?”

That question is not just put to those two overly ambitious disciples. It is put to us. It is a question we are asked in baptism. “Are you willing to follow in the footsteps of the Christ? Are you willing to follow in the footsteps of the anointed one whose footsteps lead inevitably to rejection, to being scapegoated, even to being lynched?”

While this question is especially pertinent to those who would exercise leadership, it is not just for them. It is a question for all who would be a part of the church, because as the church, we are called and anointed to be “in Christ”, carrying out his radical suffering and saving leadership in the world.

The Apostle Paul asks the group he encountered in Ephesus, “If you know nothing of the Holy Spirit, what were you baptised into?” Baptism is never just a profession of faith. It plunges us into something. It immerses us in the life of Christ, the life of the rejected, scapegoated, suffering, dying and rising Christ. It makes us part of the life that is given for the life of the world.

In baptism we are together anointed to reign with Christ. Already there we have a strange new kind of kingship, for the point of anointing (or later crowning) was to set one apart from others to rule as king over the others. Anointing was necessarily something that was reserved to one, and not shared. But when Jesus is anointed by God, the anointing happens in a rite that is open to everybody and to which everybody is invited and called.

Rather than identifying himself over and above us, Jesus invites us to join him in his messianic identity, to become one with him and in him. And so, while for practical purposes, it is usually necessary to have some differentiation of roles and responsibilities within the community, such differentiation is to be exercised within an understanding of our shared kingship within Christ. Whatever authority one has, it is derived from the authority of the whole baptised body rather than being something that sets one above the rest.

Donald Trump sought to portray himself as one of the strong men of world politics, although his apparent distaste for hard work meant that he was always more of a showman than a true strongman. But this week we saw the power of a showman to whip up a crowd to bring a democracy to its knees. As reluctant as he is to concede that the show cannot go on, his imminent departure is a reminder of the fleeting nature of such power. But I'm not holding my breath on the likelihood of it causing the world to rethink its addiction to such narcissistic bullying patterns of leadership.

We, as the Church, as the body of Jesus the Anointed One, have vowed to relinquish such patterns of leadership. In baptism we have vowed ourselves to follow in different footsteps, and to exercise leadership according to a radically different model. We have vowed ourselves to take our cues from, and model ourselves on, the one whose kingship was expressed in offering himself to be cast into the seething waters of the world's bitterness and despair, absorbing in his own body the violence of the world's anger and hatred, and rising to new life offering not revenge and retribution, but scandalous mercy and outrageous goodwill to even the most ruthless and hardened of his persecutors.

In baptism we have taken the plunge into the unfathomable ways of the Anointed One, Jesus the Christ. To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen? Amen!