



**Reimagining Empire**  
**Rev Richard Bonifant**

Year B, Easter 7  
1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19  
12 May 2024

In the name of God, Creating, Redeeming, and Giving us Life. Amen.

I don't know about you, but even now I find myself having small moments when I suddenly remember how hard the pandemic lockdowns were. Here in Auckland, we were locked down for a total of 189 days. Together we spent more than half a year, mostly at home, away from our normal patterns and routines, hoping that our efforts would protect the lives of the most vulnerable in our community. Philosophically I am glad that our community was able to come together in this way, while also appreciating that the cost was high for many of us, and the process of returning to a pre-covid way of life is still a work in progress.

That said, I know that when reflecting on the pandemic experience, my response is mostly one of gratitude. Gratitude in the sense of, I'm glad that the experience of fear and uncertainty that characterised the pandemic is no longer as acute as it once was. I have moments of using public transport, being in a large gathering, shaking hands with people only to remember that it was not so long ago that such small simple things came with a great deal of stress. It's a case of absence makes the heart grow fonder. I don't miss the stress of the pandemic, but I certainly missed many aspects of life that the lockdowns deprived us of.

Before the pandemic I was a regular movie goer. I really enjoy the big screen experience, but have only been back to a movie theatre recently. I did not rush back to see movies after the lockdowns ended, because initially the idea made me anxious, and then I simply got out of the habit. Patterns of life changed. But then came the movie Dune 2. Not only did it lull me back into a movie theatre, that film was so phenomenal that I had to see it twice.

Dune is a science fiction epic first published in the 1960's. Frank Herbert who wrote the book continued the story in six sequels, and his son has co-written another dozen books set in the Dune universe. I first read these books as a teenager, mostly because my father was a huge fan of this series. These books

gave us some common ground, even if much of the content of these stories initially went over my head.

When Frank Herbert wrote his first Dune Novel, he intended it as a cautionary tale. The story takes a young protagonist in an imperial culture, who through a mixture of heroism, religious and political manipulation, becomes an emperor. Despite this character's best intentions, wars and violence are carried out in his name. A singular powerful person is ultimately at the mercy of greater forces.

Interestingly, when the novel was first published, many of the readers of this book failed to understand that narrative as a cautionary tale, preferring to understand the story as a hero's journey. Frank Herbert was so disappointed with this misunderstanding of his vision that he wrote further books in order to make the point that messianic saviour figures are often problematic and dangerous.

The point Frank Herbert made in his fictional novel resonates because it is a story that has happened time and again throughout human history. Many empires have been led by people believing they were doing the right thing, only to cause great suffering. The sad reality is that often those in possession of power fail to see how their use of that power negatively impacts on others. The great lie of any empire is that through processes such as colonisation all people will ultimately benefit. It's the same lie of the trickle-down effect, which suggests that if we create new wealth, we will all benefit, but that is not true. Empires are never benevolent. They are based on a system which enriches some while exploiting others. Empires oppress, dehumanise, and enslave.

The trap that saviour figures often fall into within such a system is that they promise to overthrow the ways of empire and do something different, only to perpetuate the old injustices by creating a new empire. As the old saying goes, power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

The historical Jesus was no stranger to the concept of empire. As a Jewish person in first century Palestine, Jesus had first-hand experience of the exploitative nature of the Roman Empire. While many of us have learnt about the greatness of the Roman Empire, and indeed there were many fascinating aspects of the Roman world, we don't always appreciate that the opulence of Rome was achieved through the conquest and exploitation of other nations. In the first century, Palestine was one such country that had been conquered by the Romans and was being drained of much of its wealth. In this context we know that there were those in the Jewish community that hoped to find a

military leader that would lead an uprising against the Romans. Many wanted to replace the Roman Emperor with an Emperor of their own. They gave this imagined saviour a name, the messiah. But as I already suggested, the solution to empire is not to simply find a new emperor. The solution to empire is to abandon it completely.

While the Gospels can be guilty of painting a portrait of Jesus as a singular leader capable of doing it all, a closer reading of the text suggests that Jesus was not establishing a community that was centred on him in the way an empire centres on an emperor. Rather Jesus was developing a very different style of leadership. The entire ministry of Jesus was practiced in a collegial way, meaning that Jesus gathered other leaders together to share in the task of building their community. The disciples and followers of Jesus were not simply witnesses to what Jesus was doing, they were active participants. And in time their participation grew into much more, because, as the book of Acts makes clear, following the crucifixion the work of those first followers of Jesus did not come to an end. And this is what makes the Jesus movement so different to other religious movements of the time. Jesus was not the only would-be messiah to be executed. The Romans killed a number of revolutionary leaders, because when they did so, the followers of those leaders typically gave up their cause, or went and found a new leader to follow. This was not what happened with the followers of Jesus. After Jesus was no longer with them, their numbers grew, because while Jesus was the catalyst, the vision he developed with his community was greater than him as an individual.

When the church first began to call Jesus names like King of Kings, they were expressing the fact that Jesus was a leader who was radically different to the dictators and tyrants of that time. Whereas Emperors gained power and wealth, Jesus divested himself of both. Whereas Emperors strived to have complete control, Jesus empowered those around him. King of kings is the concept that the leadership of Jesus was so different to how leaders normally conduct themselves that we should abandon the concept of having singularly brilliant leaders altogether, and find leadership from within the church community itself. To use the ideas of Walter Brueggemann, Jesus did not come to establish a new empire, but rather to create a neighbourhood. A community of mutual support, where the needs of all are met.

It is easy to lapse into the patterns of empire. To elevate individuals above the rest of the group and to attach our hopes and dreams to them. But this was not how the church began. The church began as a radically egalitarian community

where the path forward was found through conversation and debate, by chances taken, and ideas explored. The challenge for us is to continue to aspire to that vision. The vision of a church where all are welcome, all participate, and together we discern how best to make love known in this world.  
Amen.