

Christ The Un-King C

This is the Feast of Christ the King -- that announcement is as puzzling as it is glorious. For us, the idea of having a king is a dubious one to say the least.

The actual feast day was established by Pope Pius XI. In 1925 he thought it would be a good message to send to the fascists: Mussolini may be our dictator, but Christ is our King. And in a brave challenge to worldly power, he declared that the primary allegiance for all Christian people is to God, and thenceforth there would be an official day every year to remind everybody of the fact. So that when we say "Thy kingdom come," we might remember that we're talking about something as real as it is atypical. Popes can do that sort of declaring. It didn't stop the horrors of fascism, and what's worse, when Pius died, his successor decided to go along to get along with the Nazis, but at least it helped keep the seeds of hope from dying in the fires of holocaust and war. Anglicans and others along with the Roman Catholics have kept the feast day as a reminder of our truer allegiance.

What can it mean for us, this long and powerful tradition of Jesus' reign, his being the King of the Jews, the King of Kings, and the King Eternal? What can these associations do to orient us towards God? The number of worldly kings has dwindled down to a precious few. The ones who are called monarchs tend to be more

ceremonial than dictatorial, and generate more interest through their social activities than their pronouncements. Heads of state who do things the way queens and kings used to are mostly pretending to be duly elected and widely supported by people they control with force.

Nowadays our idea of royalty is more romantic than foundational, more likely to conjure up a storybook character in the past than a living person who orders everyone around. And a very good thing that is, too. Better a Prom Queen than a Maleficent. Anybody who believes otherwise should go see *Hamilton* again. Christ the King must always be very different indeed from any other to have our allegiance.

Jesus is very reluctant to be called a King. To the question, "Are you a king?" he answers Pilate, "You say so." He doesn't sound as if he's trying to prove a powerful point. He doesn't say, "You bet your life I'm a King...I'm the King!" And the kingdom he presides over is pretty loosely run; it's borders are open to anybody, and the prevailing attitude seems to be one of humility, not triumph. It's a wonderland, where the rule of love takes precedent over the rule of law.

Part of why Jesus hesitates to claim the title is that this kingdom is as yet more expected than established on spaceship Earth. Who knows? Perhaps there is another place and planet out in the vastness where

Jesus appeared and everyone right away said, “Ah yes, here is the solution!” And have been living like that ever since. Was he there right before he came here, and it made him expect better treatment from us? Or did he go there right after the ascension, in search of greener pastures? Perhaps that incarnation was as Jesusita, which made all the difference, and they have been living happily ever since. It leaves you with all kinds of ideas.

Unlike most kings of this World, Jesus’ appearance was brief. He was born in a cow shed and rode to his triumph on a burro. His sayings are difficult to understand, often downright exasperating: ‘The last shall be first; Turn the other cheek; if someone asks for your coat, give them your cloak, too.’ What you might call extravagantly counter-instinctive. It seems like you’d have to be a fool to follow such advice.

But we have come to realize that God’s foolishness is a better beacon than human wisdom. We have observed that coming to God as unlearned children – even though it might seem a little foolish – is what God wants. And so we seek to follow this very different kind of king and become fools for love.

This can be especially hard for us Americans. After all, our nation was founded on the renunciation of kingship and demagoguery, and we tend to be reluctant, even cynical about letting someone tell us how to behave. Moreover, we tend to be dissatisfied with the

why and wherefore of pure ideas – such as all persons are created equal -- and this waffling has led to plenty horrors. We withhold our commitments: to each other, to our communities, and to the well-being of other nations until we determine the exact degree of benefit to ourselves; and it had better be high. So our commitments remain tentative, or altogether absent.

But no one has ever failed who has truly tried to follow the king called Christ, even though their lives may have been uneventful or wrongly served. Because this king makes only one royal commandment: “Commit to love first, ask questions later.”

As Jesus puts it, the only unredeemable thing is to deny the spirit of love. Today is the day we prepare to begin another year by declaring our allegiance to this very different king; one with very different ideas of power. Because our images of kingship have taken on a storybook quality that makes practical acceptance and discipleship, let alone submission seem ephemeral and very hard to grasp, how can we possibly prepare? Perhaps we would do well by remembering “It is not the solid stick of wood that can become a flute; it is the empty reed.”

It is a kingdom like no other – one no human beings have experienced or well-imagined – but we do have the necessary instructions. And we have the promise: “...heed me and walk in my ways...at once I will turn my

hand against your enemies...and fill your mouth with honey...from the rock!" Jesus' life and words are the description, the manual for this strange, revolutionary kingdom of which we would be part. The parables demand our interpretation, our acceptance and our action in order to make sense. It is a kingdom of God's making, but of our doing. We must develop the habit of asking ourselves what truth is, and accept the answer: 'United we stand; divided we fall,' so 'seek ye first the kingdom of love, and all the rest shall be added unto you.'

Selflessly loving is risky business, it puts us in jeopardy. It's something we might shy away from if we hadn't sworn allegiance to a king who says we gotta do it. But jeopardy is the best game: big risks, big payoffs. That is the life of a Christian. God gives us the answers and we each have to experience new questions for ourselves. Let's play: The category: Cosmic Truth for fifty. And the answer is: Jesus. Anybody? Who is the King of Love?