

Jesus Christ Universal King – Year B

Nowadays most people have indifferent or even negative reactions to the idea of being ruled over by a monarch, king or queen. As a result, the notion of Christ the King may not kindle much warmth in our spiritual makeup. However, some awareness of the origin of the feast might help us appreciate its spiritual intention. This is not a feast about royalty or power but about the place of Christ in our spiritual lives.

Origin of the Feast

The feast of Christ the King was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925. In his encyclical letter *Quas Primas* the pope was addressing the spread of a climate in which respect for religion was waning in the western world. People, including many Catholics, began to doubt both the authority and the very existence of Jesus Christ. Europe was also witnessing the rise of dictatorships, which were expounding the kind of propaganda that deceived people into placing more confidence in these narcissistic leaders than in spiritual values. Pius, impelled by the idea that the authority of Christ needed reinforcement, was hoping to remind leaders and nations that they owed respect to Christ. More particularly, he wanted to institute a feast that would strengthen and encourage Catholics to allow Christ to reign in their minds, hearts and whole lives (*Quas Primas* 31, 33).

In a world where authority is distrusted, and so often people in authority are found to be guilty of self-service and corruption, a fair question is: ‘Just how do I allow Christ to reign in my life? What is a practical way of bringing this about?’

Jesus’ attitude to authority is counter-cultural

It is well to recall Jesus’ own attitude to authority, bearing in mind he belonged to a society that was not individualistic; a society and culture that was structured as a pyramid, in which it was accepted that ordinary folk submitted to authority. James and John came to Jesus asking that they might sit with him in his kingdom, one on his right hand and the other on his left. Clearly, they had a traditional idea of kingship and the wielding of authority that prevailed in their world. Jesus offered an astoundingly counter-cultural reply,

but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42-45)

This is not only a demolition of the pyramid model of top-down leadership, but it is an admission that power is best exercised when it is given away through dynamic, flexible, renewable and transparent networks.

Quality life is all about solid relationships with God and fellow human beings

This blows all common and familiar ideas of kingship (ancient, medieval and modern) out of the water. Jesus is talking about a kingship of service based on profound respect, justice and compassion for all people. Notice the use of the words ‘servant’ and ‘slave’ to reinforce the main idea here. So, one authentic way of looking at Christ is to recognise that he is the best example of the life of love that finds its expression in the practical application of respect, compassion and service of others – qualities that prevent love from being spineless or wishy-washy. As always, the words and example of Jesus Christ mesh beautifully. Isn’t it remarkable, though, how some figures in a hierarchy, secular or religious, believe their authority will be eroded if they show collegiality or equality with others? But look at Jesus Christ. His compassion and authenticity continued to impress and draw followers. He was a risk-taker, with nothing to hide or defend and not given to sweet talk. He knew full well that quality life was all about solid relationships with God and fellow human beings.

Daniel 7:13-14

The readings of today have a kingship theme that is couched in the language of ancient views of kingship and authority. The first extract from the prophecy of Daniel describes a vision the prophet had of the anointed messiah of God coming before the throne of the Almighty to receive sovereignty over the whole earth. Christians have always seen the figure of Christ in this vision and have regarded the kingship of Christ to be an eternal reality. The ancient Jews had the idea that God would establish a divine rule over the earth and this would be the Kingdom of God. It would become clear to everyone that God’s Kingdom had come when all humanity would live according to the will of God and the values of goodness and justice towards all.

Psalm 92/93

The responsorial psalm is clearly a royal psalm extolling the sovereignty of God and paying due tribute to the Almighty as the source of life and of all that exists. According to the rather simple worldview of the ancient Israelites God ruled in the heavens above the earth and looked down on creation. The psalmist expresses great confidence in the firmness and stability of God’s rule, which has none of the ambition,

self-service or fickleness that can typify the governing principles and decision-making of human kings and modern politicians.

Revelation 1:5-8 The second reading is from the book of Revelation or the Apocalypse, the last book in the Bible. Apocalypse is Greek for 'revelation' and chapters 4-22 contain revelations and visions that were experienced by a first century Christian community elder known as John of Patmos. John wrote his visions down in the form of a long letter, which was a unique way to register such visions. He is stating that the new era of God's Kingdom has been inaugurated by Jesus Christ and the opening section of this reading is a doxology, which is an expression of praise attributing glory to God and/or Jesus Christ. The doxology contains titles of Christ that express the importance of his death, resurrection and exaltation in glory. The highly metaphorical imagery of Christ coming on the clouds to preside over the last days is a common one in ancient apocalyptic literature. The author is here picking up the symbolic imagery of the first reading from Daniel, in which the son of man comes to God on the metaphorical clouds of heaven.

Christ is also described as the beginning and the end of all creation. The prophet Isaiah referred to God as the beginning and the end of all creation and Christians extended this connotation to Jesus Christ. Everything starts and finishes with Christ. The first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, Alpha (Α) and Omega (Ω), are used as symbols of the beginning and the end, and, as bookends, encompass and signify totality.

John 18:33-37 The Gospel writers describe Jesus as the one who was to bring in the Kingdom of God and so their descriptions of Jesus show him to be the herald of a new age in which the values of goodness would take over people's lives if only they were prepared to sign on to them and become followers of Christ. Today's Gospel reading is the John writer's way of sorting out what the kingdom of Christ is NOT. Pilate knows Roman authority, and so cannot cope with any definition of king that does not fit his presuppositions.

This feast of Christ the King means we put Christ as number 1 in our value system

One cultural viewpoint of today's Scripture readings is that kings on thrones rule with supreme authority over underlings. Another important aspect is that good kings were seen as the protectors of their people providing them with prosperity, peace and security. However, in his reply to Pilate Jesus insists that his kingdom is not of this world and is not marked by the standard characteristics of earthly kingdoms. We know that in his teachings and engagement with others Christ offered a totally new and radical concept of kingship. We need to appreciate that king, kingdom and kingship are metaphors, not physical realities. Christ is king in our lives when we allow his person and values to take over our spirituality, our attitudes and all our relationships.

Paul uses the regal imagery of Christ sitting at the right hand of God and this, too, is metaphorical language from a former world and culture. It is an unhelpful image for us today because it paints a mental picture of two male figures ruling over heaven and earth. God is the source of all being and is way beyond human imagining, and certainly cannot be domesticated or contained in a narrow one-dimensional male concept that does not encompass the female half of creation, much less the non-human side of reality.

If we look at today's feast and say, 'so what!' a meaningful response is: this feast celebrates the centrality of Christ in our lives. It is certainly not a feast about royalty and power since the Christ of the gospels was not a figure of power as our world understands power. Jesus was definitely not a control freak. He had the kind of serenity that accepts the fact that we cannot control everything in our lives, nor should we try to. Rather, he stood for the kind of honesty, respect, compassion and integrity that comes with a sound relationship with God and our fellow human beings. The example of his own relationships as well as his teachings clearly demonstrates that fact. Living according to the teachings of Christ as put forward in the gospels, enables us to have Christ as 'number one' in our value system.



The unforgiving mind rigidly sees the past and future as the same and is resistant to change. It does not want the future to be different from the past.

Gerald Jampolsky (internationally recognised authority in psychiatry)

The art of living lies less in eliminating troubles than in growing with them.

Bernard Baruch (American financier and advisor to Presidents Woodrow Wilson and F.D. Roosevelt)



Did you hear about the Talking Jewish Mother Doll?

~ You pull the string and it says, 'Again with the string!'

Laurie Woods