

## CHRIST THE KING

*Jesus said, 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him. " Matthew 25: 31*

Christ the King Sunday. The final Sunday of the church year. One of my commentaries says "The last Sunday sounds a triumphant , but not triumphalist, note" Not triumphalist? It would be hard to prove that from the hymns we sing today; *Bring forth the royal diadem/ and crown him Lord of all.* Sounds triumphalist to me.

Someone asked me in my early years at St John's what I planned to do about Christ the King Sunday with its images of masculine royalty, its outmoded and sexist theology? Try to down play it, or play it up? This inquisitor was a dedicated feminist, fresh out of seminary. And her suggestion to me was, as long as we celebrate this Sunday at all, how can you make it subtle? *So, bring it on! Bring on the King!*

And so that's what I've done. Because I think if we do *bring it on* then we have to deal. We have to ask ourselves, what can we possibly mean when we talk about Christ the King?

We end the church year on this note of triumph, and really, triumphalism, and then we move immediately into the silence and darkness and waiting of Advent. We go from celebrating the triumph of the king to waiting for the birth of the king, all in one short week. It 's a liturgical roller coaster, or it can be if we take these celebrations to heart. Christ the King to Advent I, rather like Holy Week - from the victorious procession of the Palms to the mourning of Good Friday and then to the celebration of the Resurrection, again, in one short week – one hectic week!

For some reason, as I meditated about this change in the liturgical calendar, I was struck by the absolutely cyclical nature of our worship. One of the lessons we learn when we study Hebrew Scripture is that the great project of the children of Abraham was to distinguish themselves from the practitioners of nature religions who surrounded them. The nature religions worshipped many gods; the Hebrews came to believe in and to worship just one god. The nature religions believed that their gods died each year and rose again with the seasons. The Hebrews proclaimed that their one god was eternal, everlasting.

And then we get Christ. We get, every year at Christmas, the birth of Christ, and every year in Holy Week, the death of Jesus and then the Resurrection. Now, we believe

that Jesus of Nazareth lived once and died once, and we say that Christ is eternal, co-existent with the Creator and the Spirit. That's our theology, our formal and intellectual belief. But every year we celebrate birth and death and rebirth.

I was talking with a parishioner recently about his young son's confusion at the religious meaning of our holidays: "Jesus is born, and then three months later he's grown up and dead!" How did that happen so fast?

A good question. The answer, I suppose, is that as a community of faith, as a church, we all rehearse the entire story of The First Coming every year. We experience together waiting for and celebrating the miracle of the birth of a Messiah, the beginnings and some high points of his earthly ministry, and his death. And then after Easter we study the teachings he left with us, the teachings that inform our faith and practice. All of this culminates this Sunday, with Christ as King, and then we begin all over again.

We understand, as adults anyway, that we are repeating a story that, historically and I suppose theologically, happened only once. But how are we supposed to feel? If we are truly living our faith, aren't we supposed to feel as if it's happening all over again every year? Aren't we meant to suffer on the cross with Jesus every good Friday? Aren't we supposed to feel in all its marvelous new astonishment the birth in the stable and then the empty tomb?

And if we do feel all this anew each year, how is that so different from the nature religions? And if we're not so different, does that really matter?

Now perhaps these are heretical questions. But if we don't ask such questions now and again, - or if I don't- it's hard to know what I really do believe, what is unique about Christianity, for me, and what is that important. And is it most important to emphasize what is unique and different about Christian faith and practice, or is it more profitable and creative, in this day and age, to discover what different forms of religion share? Maybe at a level of feeling and even of meta-practice, we have more in common with Wiccans than we might believe?

Well, I have traveled a way – from Christ the King, Christ *as* King to Wiccans. But let me try to make a connection, or at least, ask another question about connection. Can we take anything from the figure of Christ the King, which feels in many ways alien, antiquated, and objectionable? Is this metaphor, this title, of any use to us today in our faith and practice? And how, if at all are we to negotiate our way from a celebration of the majesty and royalty and pomp and circumstance of this day to the quiet solemn waiting we are asked to begin next week with Advent?

As I pondered these questions, I came across a short article in last Sunday's New York Times. The headline reads, **Throne Occupied; Try a Comfy Recliner**, and the piece begins,

On Friday, Charles, the Prince of Wales, turned 60. He's now been the heir apparent to the British throne for 56 years, waiting to be King of England since 1952.

The decades pass, the millennium shifts, empires crumble and rise, and Charles still waits. He grows grayer and more bald, a little paunchier and a bit stooped. In a culture of frenetic multitasking and dread that seconds might be lost while a computer warms up, he's a figure of stoic patience and endurance.

In the meantime, he's relevant — kind of — in a low-key way. He christens ships and travels to funerals. He speaks out on architecture and global warming and organic farming. He paints, he drives an Aston Martin that uses biofuels. He presides over meetings and charities.

But mostly, he waits for his mother, Elizabeth II, the Queen, to give up the throne in life or death.

So as I read this it occurred to me that Charles and his example provide quite a bridge for us between Christ the King and the season of Advent. He's not a king, not quite, not yet, but he is a prince, a royal, a rarity in this modern world and as alien a concept perhaps, to we Americans as Christ the King. The article continues

We nonroyals have our own disappointments, of course. We get overlooked and passed over and rejected. But these are quiet disappointments.... Charles's disappointment, his failure to assume the crown, in contrast, is the stuff of worldwide headlines and painful comic riffs. The Guardian (newspaper says, bluntly): "And yet the moment for which his whole life has been a preparation eludes him." Ouch.

But maybe Charles doesn't see it this way. Maybe he understands something we don't: that we all spend our lives waiting for one thing or another. Americans of Charles's age, with our carpe diem attitudes and can-do optimism and razzle-dazzle impatience, have already throttled through initial careers and second and even third careers. At 60 we might finally pause and ask ourselves, why have we been in such a rush??...

The arc of Charles's life is quite different. At 60, unlike the rest of us, he still hasn't realized his full potential, he still looks ahead to a greater future. He has perfected a life of almost-youthful expectation. Someday, if he endures long

enough, he will be King of England. Until then, as they say in his country, God save the Queen.

So here we have a king-in-waiting. We all know a bit too much about the non-regal aspects of Charles 's life to romanticize him. But as the article points out, he has perfected the art of waiting – waiting, I would say, with public grace, whatever his private sorrows and resentments may be.

In the meanwhile, much of his life is a series of repetitive rituals. Doubtless he attends the same ceremonies year in and year out, at the pleasure of the Queen. His public life has a liturgical quality to it: the pomp and circumstance, the commemorations, the honoring of sorrow and loss, accomplishment and joy. And he is working for the people as well as for the Queen – however much the Brits ridicule and disparage their royals, they don't want to eliminate them, not just yet. So Charles lives a life of regal service.

Thus, we may see him as incorporating a version of that paradox we encounter at this moment of our liturgical year: the juxtaposition of the majesty of kingship and the humility of patient waiting and lowly birth. And his life's witness can also be seen as shadowing the larger reality of our own Christian faith and practice.

On the one hand, our worship calendar repeats the same cycle year in and year out, as, doubtless, does Charles's schedule of public rituals. Every year, beginning anew next Sunday, we await the birth of the Christ child in a manger and in our hearts. And at the same time, we are engaged in a larger waiting, one that arcs over our entire lives of faith. Charles waits to inherit the throne, the crown. We await the Second Coming of Christ, in which the reign of justice, love, and freedom, will be ushered in once and for all.

That hope and expectation rules our days, our months and years. That hope and expectation directs our gaze, and our actions, beyond the immediacy of seasonal change and present doubt and anxiety. That hope and expectation reminds us, as our gospel does today, what the kingship of Christ ultimately means: the king is the one who was hungry, thirsty, strange, naked, sick, or imprisoned. The king is the one who was least among us, and shall be first.

Alleluia, Alleluia, Amen.

