

Last Sunday after Pentecost (29B) – Christ the King – November 22, 2015
2 Samuel 23:1-7; Psalm 132:1-19; Revelation 1:4b-8; John 18:33-37
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Christ the King

Here we are on this last Sunday of the Christian calendar, known also as Christ the King Sunday. We still speak – and sing - of Jesus as King, as Sovereign of the Universe, head of the Church – the One who is often majestically portrayed with crown and orb and scepter, sometimes seated or standing on a rainbow, in the great “Te Deum” stained-glass windows of many churches – some of which is found in the Bobby Dennis memorial window above us. Even the title “Christ” which in Hebrew is “Messiah” literally means, “the one anointed by God to be king.” And so we have here Christ the King—above us, among us and within us.

Today’s reading from the book of Revelation describes Jesus as “the ruler of the kings of the earth.” And in John’s gospel we hear Jesus describe his kingdom in terms so different from the way things operate in other kingdoms. One of the hardest words to understand in the Christian faith is the word “King” – along with the word “kingdom.” It has been said that “king” is the most un-crucified word in our Christian vocabulary. As Ian Ramsay and others have pointed out, religious language can be challenging and troubling.ⁱ One way to look at religious language would be to compare it, for example, to the 16th Century painter El Greco, or to the 20th Century Picasso. Both artists in their own styles, took fingers, heads, noses and other human features and elongated or distorted them in their paintings. Showing great imagination, they dared to distort physiological details to get at the multi-faceted and deeper mysteries of human life and personality. With similar imagination, biblical writers tried to portray the even greater mystery of God by deliberately distorting relationships. For example, to show the transcendence of God, they called God “King of kings” and “Lord of lords.” And to show that God cared for each of us as if God had no one and nothing else to care for—and because at that time they thought the source of life came from fathers more than from mothers—they called God “Father.” It was a very imaginative use of language, for obviously God is only symbolically, not literally, either king, lord or father. And, obviously, that language was culturally conditioned, engendering both patriarchal and hierarchical images.ⁱⁱ

So, “King” or “Sovereign” – what do those words conjure up?ⁱⁱⁱ Many of us don’t think of kings or queens in our daily lives, except, maybe, the long-reigning Elizabeth II of England. But we do have images of what a king or sovereign might have been like, images formed by Scripture and Shakespeare, history books and fairy tales. Whether we think of King David or Solomon, the Pharaohs of Egypt or the Emperors of China, Charlemagne or Henry the Eighth, Louis the Fourteenth or the Czars of Russia, as Frederick Buechner put it viscerally,

“The person of the king was so sacred that affronts upon him were punished with the most horrible of torments, and his touch had the power to heal. Passionate loyalty, adoration, terror, awe – no words are perhaps too strong to describe the

feelings evoked in his subjects by the mere sight of him, and it's no wonder. He held the power of life and death over them. Their destiny was in his keeping. He defended the kingdom against all enemies both from within and from without. He was the kingdom. If he rejoiced, it rejoiced with him. If he was angry, the earth trembled and the crops might fail."^{iv}

Such was the way kings and queens ruled for thousands of years. On the one hand, the people of Israel and Judah had such a high view of the King that they readily gave such title to God – for example, as the writer of the 24th Psalm proclaimed, "Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory!"^v This leads us to Christ the King. Some time ago I shared this fable by Soren Kierkegaard about a king who fell in love with a maid, and it bears repeating on this Christ the King Sunday:

"When asked, 'How shall I declare my love?' his counselors answered, 'Your majesty has only to appear in all the glory of your royal raiments before the maid's humble abode and she will instantly fall at your feet and be yours.' But it was precisely that thought that so troubled the king. He wanted her glorification, not his. In return for his love, he wanted hers, freely given. The one thing he did not want was her submission to his power. What a dilemma, when not to declare his love spelled the end of love, and to declare it spelled the end of his beloved! Finally, the king realized love's truth, that freedom for the beloved demanded equality with the beloved. So late one night, after all the counselors and courtiers of the palace had retired, he stole out a side door and appeared before the maid's cottage dressed as a servant."^{vi}

With that in mind, it is important that just for a moment we make quite sure, especially before we head into the season of the Advent of the King of kings, that this notion of "king" becomes transformed in our understanding. The kingship or sovereignty of Christ is *not* the kingship of some earthly ruler raised to the nth degree. You cannot put an infinity mark against might and kingship as we know it and then apply it to Christ. Each year on this Christ the King Sunday we are given a picture of a Christ whose majesty is not the tinsel of earthly pomp and glory, and whose power is not practiced in possessing dominions nor in coercion through force. This year it is Christ before Pontius Pilate who says, in essence, "you – a king?" The essence of Jesus' response to Pilate is that the kingdoms of this world insist on maintaining and defending their own sovereignty. Short of war, no outside power could depose their monarch. If the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed were one in the same with the other kingdoms of this world, Jesus would not have been handed over without a fight (John 18:36). The fact that there had been no fight, nothing more than Peter's impulsive attack upon the ear of the High Priest's slave, demonstrated the falsity of the charge brought against Jesus that he was the King of the Jews. Here we come to the crux of the matter. According to the gospel, the only royalty Jesus claimed was as the bearer of truth – namely, in Jesus, humanity could see more fully than ever before the true nature, the very being of God. And likewise, through Jesus' actions, we can recognize our human nature as God truly intended it to be.

So then, we don't see the majesty of Christ's kingship in jeweled crowns or imperial might or way up on high. Rather we are shown it in the power of his love and humility and the places he goes down to - the places where dislocation, despair and division are most prevalent. Christ's majesty is nearly the opposite of our notion of majesty. God is already in highest majesty and power as God supports and sustains the Universe. But in Jesus, God's Love and Power come down to bend and to reach us. God's power is not above or over all, but with all, in full relationship. The Almighty stooping! Yes. Nor is the kingly power of God in Christ the acquisitive drive to own and control. Rather it is the openness to be satisfied with human relationships and basic human needs. The sovereign power of God is not that of exercising jurisdiction over one dominion or nation, but exercising stewardship over all creation and nations, working to bring all to unity and community. Christ's power is not that of unilaterally ordering everyone about; rather it is the service of restoring worth and dignity and voice to each and every human being. Finally, Christ's power is not an unyielding force or decree backed up with violence. Rather, it is the bending, heart-renewing glance of a forgiving face – the one who stands before Pilate, the face of Jesus on the cross.

It is God's majesty to be with us in all our failing and falling and dying. And all aspects of our lives – spiritual, social, economic, political - and all institutions that wield power in these different arenas of life, are accountable to God's Realm, the Realm of the One who is King of kings and Lord of lords.

So yes, Christ is King – Sovereign – but a king who serves, whose ruling means loving compassion for all and with all, especially the least and the lost and the left behind. And, as you know, and the upcoming Advent season anticipates, Christ is the one whose “reverse sovereignty,” as it were, shows itself from the very beginning in the quiet, ordinary and vulnerable circumstances of His birth.

ⁱ See Ian Ramsey, Religious Language: An Empirical Placing of Theological Phrases (London: SCM Press, 1957).

ⁱⁱ In our day where more inclusive and egalitarian ways of thinking and speaking occur, it is important to say that if inclusive and less hierarchical language could be put forward and still symbolize transcendence and immanence, then it would be hard to object to such new language simply because we are used to the old. The words “Sovereign” for “King”, “Realm” for “Kingdom,” begin to make this transformation in recent translations of Scripture.

ⁱⁱⁱ *King* – what does this word conjure up? As one interpreter of archetypal symbols writes,

“Every culture has its version of king and queen. They are the ‘crowned heads’ of a people, traditionally individuals exalted on account of having seemingly great or singular mana, superior personalities or being first in powers or skills essential to the welfare of the tribe. They reflect what is sovereign within the psyche of an individual or of a society, the principles and beliefs that hold sway. That these principles are partly under the dominion of consciousness and partly the unconscious [or beyond our consciousness] is reflected in the ambiguous nature of king or queen. They are human, yet approximated to the gods. They are likened to the divine luminaries, sun and moon, in the celestial sphere, and to the precious metals gold and silver embodying the solar and

lunar substance in the earthly sphere. Majesty is elevated by the throne and by wearing a crown or a headdress, suggesting the rayed *corona* of the sun, or its glinting wings or all-seeing eye. The ruler possesses the orb and scepter, signifying primacy over the worldly realm, and is cloaked in the jeweled mantle, suggesting the glittering firmament... Often, especially in ancient times, the king or queen assumed the quasi-priestly role of mediating between the mundane and supra-mundane dimensions... Behind our fascination, even today, with reigning monarchs and their ceremonial opulence there stirs a recognition that they preserve a lost link to something royal, something greater than the familiar sphere of the ego, within ourselves. The psychic fields around the figures of king and queen have ever activated tensions, longings and quests... Sometimes it is the royal figure that does the heroic thing, makes the essential sacrifice or finds a way back from exile.

A *coronation* is a *solificatio*, for the crowned head is identified with the sun and its force of life and fertility, which, in the crowning of a sovereign, is conferred on the whole kingdom... [besides actual kings and queens] children in their make-believe, beauty queens, athletic victors and royal heirs still seek the crown, whose lofty ritual and ancient symbolism secure its glory... Yet the crown can be weighty, more than merely a halo of splendor... The crown of thorns pierces the brow of Christ on the cross, mocking his earthly 'kingship' while elevating his suffering to spiritual majesty" (Quoted in "King/Queen" and "Crown" in *The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism*, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (Cologne, Germany: TASCHE, 2010), pp. 470, 540).

^{iv} Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pp.69-70

^v This metaphor of God as King – as sovereign – was used again and again in Scripture. To the prophets from Samuel on, God alone was King over Israel; and God alone was to be held in awe, to be loved, to be obeyed over any human king. So on the other hand, as Buechner put it, "when the people decided they wanted a king of flesh and blood like all the other nations, Samuel warned them that the consequences would be tragic (1 Samuel 8:4-18), and history proved him correct in every particular [way]" (Buechner, *Ibid.*, p. 70). There was a consistent strand in Israel's history of ambivalence regarding the kings who reigned – many poorly – and of kingship itself; and finally, Israel's kings and Israel as kingdom vanished from history altogether.

^{vi} Quoted in William Sloane Coffin, *Living the Truth in a World of Illusions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 3-4