

Royal treatment - Living by the Word

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ANOTHER CHURCH YEAR ends on November 23 with the festival of Christ the King. Although a few folks get jazzed over this festival, most of us need to be reminded that the church year is different from the calendar year, the academic year and the budget year.

On most minor and major church festivals, I remind my congregation how ancient these festivals are. I like to wow them with the vast number of centuries the church has been observing some of them. The festival of Christ the King spoils that plan. It was first introduced in 1925, and not until 1969 was it designated the festival for the last Sunday of the church year. Since I cannot wow them with a millennium's worth of tradition, I emphasize how the church continues to create traditions and make liturgical history.

It is odd to think that the 20th-century church developed a festival centering on Christ's image as king. In America we are as distanced from the image of "king" as we are from the image of "shepherd." Popular theology is more intrigued with the image of Jesus as CEO--a leadership role, to be sure, but hardly comparable to that of a king with a kingdom. Our American brush with royalty comes mostly from Britain. We might not be able to name any kings, but we are familiar with Queen Elizabeth and with the tabloids and tragedies surrounding her family. We would easily recognize the queen, yet many of us are unaware of what she really does from day to day and what her powers really are. Royalty is respected, it's part of the tradition, but does it really do anything? Do we need it?

I wonder and worry that people perceive Christ's rule to be similar to the queen of England's rule. Do we view Christ as one surrounded with the art and beauty of a tradition that is more antique

than active? Do we see this figure of salvation as hopelessly outdated and practically mute in these postmodern times?

If we stretch ourselves to think in royal terms, we remember that although "king" may be an unfamiliar symbol, it is a political term. Kings rule a particular piece of geography. They may rule over a particular ethnic group. They have subjects--they have "a people." What we declare on this last Sunday of the church year is: Christ has made of us a people.

Growing up in the South, I often heard the home folks ask of a sows girlfriend, "Who are her people?" They were fishing for two things: a family name and a location. "She's one of the Wingards from over Lexington way." Tiffs information could make one be embraced or shunned. I never heard "people" used outside of Family until I moved out of the overwhelmingly Christian South and lived in Chicago. Here "my people" was used for distinct ethnic groups and religious groups. And it was an unspoken truth that if any significant rubber ever hit any significant road, it was your people that mattered. A "people" was not a biological unit. They didn't necessarily share DNA but perhaps things more bonding: a common story, the foods and meals they are together, the experiences they endured and the hopes that endure through generations. I envied their sense of solidarity and identity. It's good to have a people.

Those who have been baptized into Christ Jesus are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. Christ has made of us a people with his kingship. And that kingship is unique, unlike any earthly kingship that is bound by geographic borders. This kingdom is boundless. Christ's rule is not limited to a particular racial or national group. All are welcome, especially the chronically unwelcome ones. Christ reigns from the cross, we say. Christ rules, as many earthly rulers do, because he has waged battle and has been victorious. But Christ's enemies are sin, death and the devil, all defeated by Christ's death. In a kingdom of a lowly stable and an empty tomb, death birthed life.

To speak of kings and kingdoms, of subjects and peoples, requires a fair amount of translation for modern ears. Some, finding the translation too cumbersome, will opt for calling Jesus their CEO or therapist. But what will then be truly lost is not the title used, but the relationship implied.

To say Christ is king implies that we are subjects. The heart of this relationship is our dependence on a ruler who holds our lives in his hands. We do not choose a ruler as we elect a

president, hire a CEO or contract with a therapist. We are Christ's people--we share the same eucharistic foods, we share the same story of faith, we stake our lives on the same hopes.

Here at the end of the church year, after living through another cycle of hearing the story of Jesus' life, of being taught by him in miracle and parable, we come to the coda of this hymn of praise. After another year of living our lives, burying our dead, baptizing our babies, marrying and divorcing, struggling and thriving, we bring all of the year's experiences to the climax of this day. We lay it all back at the feet of the one enthroned on the cross, giving thanks. It's great to be a people ruled in love and mercy.

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