

It's Christ the King Sunday today. This is relatively new feast day in the life of the church. It was instituted by Pope Pius in 1925, and has been celebrated in our own Episcopal Church on the last Sunday in Advent only since 1970. It's funny how I always think of 1970 as only 30 years ago—but alas it is not. It's 51 years ago. Still—even though I was not yet in high school then—as things go: it's relatively recent.

The information that it's a modern holy day in the life of the church surprised me. I myself have always been somewhat ambivalent about Christ the King-- partly because of its patriarchal roots, and partly because the idea of a ruling King is somewhat foreign to us in the USA..

I wonder what could have been happening in the 1920's to make the power structure of the Roman Catholic church decide it needed to embrace such a Christ figure?

Kingship. What do you think of when you hear that word? What King—other than Christ—springs immediately to your mind?

I asked that question at the Wednesday service and I got surprising answers. Henry the Eighth, King Bertie, Queen -----, Henry the Second. Lots of Henry's

When I think of a king, ruthless despots like Caesar and Genghis Khan immediately come to mind—probably because I've been watching too many Discovery channel recreations.

But when I think of a benevolent King—the first person think of is King Arthur. I was really surprised that on Wednesday no one said that. It is interesting that the most revered benevolent King in history may just be a fable.

So why is Christ lifted up as a King when Jesus himself firmly rejected that notion throughout his life and ministry? Is it because we need to see the Christ figure as strong? Do we need to see the Christ figure as powerful? Someone who makes laws and expects obedience? Does one need to be a "king" to be those things?

Why do we call Jesus "king", when Jesus never called himself that?

Listen to the exchange this morning between Jesus and Pilate in the Gospel today:

Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over... But as it is, my kingdom is not from here. " Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice. '

Jesus says: "YOU say I am king, but I came into the world to testify to the truth. My "kingdom" is not from this world."

It sure isn't. In OUR world, kings are dressed splendidly, they gladly, sometimes callously, accept their power—for good or ill. They are jeweled and praised and honored.

As I sat staring at the passages chosen for this feast day this last week, I was struck by what is missing from the idea of a "king"-- what we don't see. First of all, we don't see the riches—or the power—or the trappings of most worldly kings.

- Here's what we DO see:
- We see that there is no path to glory in Jesus' kingship that sidesteps humility, surrender, and sacrificial love.
- We see that there is never a moment in this king's life where his-- or his disciples—prosperity may ever be at the expense of another.
- We see that there is no end that sanctifies depraved or degrading means.
- We see that there is no evidence that truth-telling can be sacrificed on the altar of expedience.
- We see that this king's realm is built on those who bravely face peace when other kingdoms are bloodthirsty for war.
- And we see no future vision of a realm that thrives when it aligns itself with power.

Where does this leave us? It leaves us with a king who is like no other. We love and serve a king who makes us profoundly uncomfortable.

And that's good.

Our king certainly is not from this world. Our King is the opposite of what the world reveres, and his laws aren't like any others.

- Our king gave up worldly power to assure us that God's power is part of every one of us.
- He gave up wealth to show us that real wealth comes from love. Love will make us rich: Rich in patience, kindness.
- This love never envies anyone or anything. It is content.
- It never dishonors others, it isn't self-aggrandizing, it doesn't anger easily.
- Our king's love doesn't tally up and remember all the little things people have done, it doesn't do fist pumps when evil wins.
- Our king always tells the truth.

I don't know any other king anywhere or anytime that has embodied those things.

Except ours.

So, today as we celebrate the feast of Christ the King, let us remember that it truly is an otherworldly king we follow.

And remember, King Arthur may have invented the Round Table, but Jesus opened up his table not just to the knights and the nobles, and the people of power, but to everyone.

And he wasn't a fable. Amen.