

Christ The King

This is the Feast of Christ the King -- that announcement is as puzzling as it is glorious. For us, the idea of a king is a mixed up one to say the least.

The actual feast day was established by the Pope Pius XI. In 1925 he thought it would be a good message to send to the fascists: Mussolini may be our dictator, but Christ is our King. And in a brave challenge to worldly power, he declared that the primary allegiance for all Christian people is to God, and there would thenceforth be an official day every year to remind everybody of the fact. So that when we say "Thy kingdom come," we might remember that we're talking about something as real as it is atypical. It didn't stop the horrors of fascism, but it did help keep the seeds of hope from dying. Anglicans and others along with the Roman Catholics have kept the feast day.

Which begs the question -- to paraphrase the great Cole Porter -- "What is this king called love, this funny king called love?"

What can it mean for us, this long and powerful tradition of Jesus' reign, his being the King of the Jews, the King of Kings, and the King Eternal? What can these associations do to orient us towards God? The number of worldly kings has dwindled down to a precious few; nowadays our idea of kingship is more romantic than foundational, more likely to conjure up a storybook character in the past than a lively and vitally present ruler. And a very good thing that is, too. Anybody who believes otherwise should go see *Hamilton* again. Christ the King must be very different indeed from any other to have our allegiance.

Now I don't recall ever hearing anyone describe Pontius Pilate as a role model, but he does set one thinking in this scene.

When he asks, “What is truth?” we first think of it as just a smart-aleck’s facetious question; flippant and cruel to ask someone on trial for his life. But it’s actually a good question, one that we could stand to ask ourselves more often, and Jesus himself asks the same thing in another way when he asks, “Who do you say that I am?”

He is very reluctant to call himself a King. To the question, “Are you a king?” he answers, “You say so,” and “My kingdom is not of this world.” He doesn’t sound as if he’s trying to prove a powerful point. He doesn’t say, “You’re darn right I’m a King...I’m the King!” And the kingdom he describes is pretty loosely run; it’s open to anybody, and the prevailing attitude seems to be one of humility, not triumph.

“Just who can solve this mystery; why should it make a fool of me...and thee?” Unlike most kings of this World, Jesus’ appearance was brief. He was born in a cow shed and rode to his triumph on a burro. His sayings are difficult to understand, often downright exasperating: ‘The last shall be first; Turn the other cheek; if he asks for your coat, give him your cloak, too.’ What you might call extravagantly counter-instinctive. You’d have to be a fool to follow his advice.

But we have come to realize that God’s foolishness is a better beacon than human wisdom. We have observed that coming to God as unlearned children – even though it might seem a little foolish – is what God wants. And so we seek to follow this very different kind of king and become fools for love.

This can be especially hard for us modern Americans to live with. After all, our nation was founded on the renunciation of kingship, and we tend to be reluctant, even cynical about letting someone outside ourselves take care of us and tell us

how we ought best to behave. We tend to be dissatisfied with the why and wherefore of ideas. We withhold our commitments, to each other, to our communities, and to the well-being of other nations until we determine the exact degree of benefit to ourselves; and it had better be high.

But the answer to Pilate's question, 'What is truth' is actually available. No one has failed who has followed this king Christ, whose one royal commandment is: "Commit to love first, ask questions later." As Jesus puts it, the only unredeemable thing is to deny the spirit of unconditional love. Today is the day we prepare to begin another year by declaring our allegiance to this very different king with his very different ideas of power.

'Prepare? Sure, we'll prepare...but for what?' Our images of kingship have taken on a cartoon quality that makes acceptance and discipleship, let alone submission very hard indeed. So how can we possibly prepare?

It is a kingdom like no other – one no human beings have experienced or well-imagined – but we do have the necessary instructions. And we have the promise: "...heed me and walk in my ways...at once I will turn my hand against your enemies...and fill your mouth with honey...from the rock!" Jesus' words are the description, the manual for this strange, revolutionary kingdom of which we would be part. The parables demand our interpretation, our acceptance and our action in order to make sense. It is a kingdom of God's making, but of **our** doing. We must develop the habit of asking ourselves what truth is, and accept the answer: 'United we stand; divided we fall so seek ye first the kingdom of love.'

Selflessly loving is risky business, it puts us in jeopardy. But the King says we gotta do it. Jeopardy's the game where you get

the answer and the question remains to be discovered. That is the life of a Christian. God gives us the answers and we each have to experience new questions for ourselves. Let's play: The category is Cole Porter songs that don't know they're about Jesus. And the answer is: Love. Anybody? Bueller? What is this King called? Jesus is called the way and the truth and the king of the life of love. We must hearken unto his voice and heed his call if we would live.