

By Father Charles Bowes

Daniel 7:13-14
Revelation 1:5-8
John 18:33-37

Jesus' kingdom is that of the human heart.

Not every image of kingliness is pleasant. Even in better times for royalty, kings have been associated with opulence, money and reckless appetite. They were distant and unapproachable, high and mighty, surrounded by “yes men” and jesters. Most strutted through time, decked in finery, decorated with trappings and trimmings of grand lordliness. It was the uncommon king who did otherwise.

King imagery is more problematic today. Not only because of widespread suspicion of hierarchy and masculine dominance: we're also not likely to be drawn to chivalrous virtues. Notions like honor, obedience, duty and loyalty challenge anyone whose highest value is individualism. We love our autonomy. We celebrate choice because it is ours. Doing the will of someone else is another matter.

Service? To serve? Servant? Servitude? The words suggest dominance: dominion, *dominus*, lord.

We end our church year with a sweep of majesty. Jesus our crucified Lord is acknowledged as Christ the

King. He himself once fled when the crowd sought to crown him their king, wanting neither the misunderstanding of temporal power nor the transient favor of mob popularity. Jesus would be king on God's terms, not on ours or on his. Heavenly kingship is quite another kind of authority. “Are you the king...?” Pilate asks Jesus in John 18. “My kingdom does not belong to this world,” Jesus answers – a strange king, to be sure. In the fourth Gospel's account of the Passion, all of our expectations of kingliness are reversed. The king-servant who washed his followers' feet, is strangely grand and noble, yet only in his quiet vulnerability and the utter truth of his being. He does not muster armies or amass territories. He just invites, relying on nothing other than our hearts' response.

Yet answering Pilate, Jesus says that his kingdom is not of this world. It is a kingdom not fought for with old means of warfare. Rather it testifies to truth. It will not kill for the truth; it will die for it. If Jesus is king, he will be a suffering king. He will not demand ransom. He will be ransom. He will win not by spilling the blood of others, but by offering up his own.

Over the centuries Christians have had trouble with this new kind of king, so much so that we hungered for earthly assurances of conquest and control. But it is equally true that the centuries have

seen men and women who recognized in Jesus a kingliness that summoned nothing less than the loyalty of a free human heart. Something was unlocked in them when they discovered a “Lord of life” whose ambition was not to dominate humanity, but to save and to serve it.

The human heart will never outgrow its longing for such a promised friend and rule. Something deep rises from within us in the face of its beauty and awakens a long-lost ache to give everything away, if a cause is only good and true enough. As the old Quaker hymn reminds us: “When love is lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?”

We need not appreciate the images of lord and king. But the godly realm we celebrate on the Solemnity of Christ the King is an alternative kingdom – heavenly, majestic and worthy of trust. It is a kingdom, indeed, not of this earth, yet brought to earth in the Word of God and made flesh. What a wonderful prelude to Advent – the season celebrating incarnation – enfleshment of God. For we who are at the table, we flesh and blood folk, become what’s on the table – glorified, united into the one body of Christ.

The Color Purple has long been associated with wealth and royalty. This ancient tradition is rooted in the exceedingly costly method used by the Phoenicians to produce purple dyes. Thousands of mollusk shells were crushed and heated in order to produce a small amount of purple dye, which was then used on only the most precious of woven fabrics. The resulting robes were more than worth their weight in gold, and they were prized by those wealthy and powerful enough to command such luxuries.

Artistic representations of Christ the King make full use of this and other symbols of splendor, wealth and royalty. Christ the King is traditionally resplendent in royal robes – enthroned, crowned and haloed, with a hand raised in benediction. But this does not appear to be St. John’s gospel understanding of Christ’s kingship. Pilate’s questioning of Jesus shows Jesus again turning social conventions upside down, redefining our understanding of the kingdom of God. This new understanding has its roots in the incarnation. Christ came to us robed not in royal purple but in human flesh. Let us pray...Almighty creator and ruler over all, we thank you for including us as citizens in your reign of joy. We pray that your kingdom may truly come, establishing justice and peace in a world without end. We ask this in the name of Christ our King.

Jesus’ kingdom is that of
the human heart.