

The Feast of Christ the King, 11/25/07 - Susan Flanders
Col. 1:11-20, Luke 23:35-43

Today we celebrate what is known in many churches as the Feast of Christ the King. We also celebrate the arrival of our new organ, and the organ has often been referred to as "the royal instrument". It seems kingship and royalty are our themes.

Probably because of our history, we Americans are skeptical when it comes to royalty, perhaps, by extension, we are skeptical about rulers in general - remembering how power corrupts, and all that. We want leaders we can trust - strong, but wise and compassionate and honest. What we hate is leadership, of any kind, that is a sham.

There is a reason the old Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale about the Emperor's New Clothes endures today, and it's one of my favorites. The tale dramatizes the ego and denial of the emperor as he buys into the fawning and flattery of his court of advisors and parades around naked, convinced that he's wearing an elegant new suit of clothes. But it also dramatizes the need of so many to believe that what passes for competence and power must go unchallenged. If the emperor and his court proclaim a new suit of clothes, then so be it. In the story, it is an innocent child who dares to speak the truth - that the emperor has nothing on at all, and eventually, the crowds realize the truth and rise in fury against the pathetically exposed ruler.

This tale can of course be applied to contemporary politics. It raises great questions about power and allegiance in any era. But I think perhaps it raises some God questions as well. This celebration of Christ as King maybe triggers some of the same skepticism in us as does any monarchy or empire. After all, we have so many other metaphors for Christ - Lamb of God, Son of God, Word of God, Son of Man, Shepherd of Souls, Suffering Servant, Prince of Peace, and then along with all these and more, King of Kings and Lord of Hosts. Many of our favorite hymns use the royal imagery: "Come thou almighty king, crown him with many crowns, his the scepter, his the throne".

The celebration of Christ the King gives us all the trappings of royalty, but then the Gospel today reminds us of the truth of the matter. Jesus died on a cross with two criminals - his so-called kingship mocked. He was powerless in that hour to save himself. He died in solidarity with all who have ever suffered - all who have sinned, who have gone without, who have been alone and betrayed and abused. Some kingship!

The ineffable mystery of the cross and resurrection is that God was there, in Jesus - in his suffering, but also in bringing him through it to new life out of death. In Jesus, invisible God was perceived as present and visible in our humanity - not as a distant ruler, remote from the world - but as the mind and heart underlying all creation. This is a staggering message! To further express it I borrow words from my favorite in-house theologian, Bill, "the mystery we call God is something deep inside all of life, and, at its most dynamic and potential, inside us humans." For Christians, it is Jesus' life and teachings and death that show us this, that inspire us, challenge us and judge us and point to God as ultimate ruler. For only God has a legitimate claim to such authority and, hence, our worship. For Christians, Jesus is our gateway to the reign of God and already shares in it. Whether or not all the world will one day adore Christ's sacred name, as the hymn "Lift high the cross" concludes, only God's good time will tell.

And so, if we think of Christ only as a king in the sense of worldly power and dominion, we rule out the power that cries out from every corner of the world where people suffer - the paradoxical power that is God in the midst of powerlessness - Christ on the cross. Christ's triumph is not in avoiding suffering, not in yielding to the devil's temptations to rule in the age-old way of oppression and lying and violence and privilege. Christ's triumph is in living the real life of a human being and coming through it all - the best, the worst, all of it, without losing the capacity for love and compassion, without giving up on meaning, without giving up on the love of God. Christ's triumph is our challenge - a way of living that really doesn't have anything to do with royalty in a conventional sense.

And now to the organ - the royal instrument. It is intriguing as the timing has worked out that today is the day of its arrival. Like Christ, royal metaphors have been applied - there was once a radio program of organ music that I loved on Sunday night called "The Royal Instrument", and we can get caught up in such imagery. From the very beginning of our process, some have said, "I don't want to worship an organ!" And they are right! As rich in the variety of sounds a fine pipe organ can bring, as handsome as it will be in appearance, as stunning and majestic as it can sound when Anne will literally let out all the stops, as much as it may draw folks to concerts, this organ is coming here chiefly as one part of our worship experience. It will be here to support our singing and not overpower it - to be music with us. It will sing with our littlest children and play along with all of our voices, old and young, off key and on. It will make a joyful noise with us, a mournful tone when we grieve. Even when the organ is sounding alone in glorious preludes and postludes and sometimes in the softest, most haunting tones, its real power will be to move our hearts.

If our worship and music are enhanced aesthetically, fine and good, but it is only if our worship and music strengthen us, inspire us and send us out better equipped to love and to live as God's people in the world, that our worship and music are really working.

So let us be glad in welcoming this royal instrument, and let us be steadfast in following Christ, but let us worship God alone. Amen.