

Feast of Christ the King (Year A) 2011
Forty Martyrs'; St Bede's (6.15)

Today's feast of Christ the King was instituted only in 1925. Thus it is not old; but it is terribly out dated. The practise of kingship, of monarchy, rule by one may survive under a different name and in a varied guise in totalitarian regimes of both fascist and communist tendency; but generally the despot veils their despotism under some semblance of democracy to give a phantasm of legitimacy to the enterprise. Royal households remain but they survive as tourist entertainments. How long will it be before they disappear, finally destroyed by another salacious scandal, or lack of interest?

The Age of Kings is over. No one today claims that the monarch has the right to sole, supreme and absolute power because they were born to it and their birth entitlement was given by God. The recent decision of the Commonwealth leaders to change rights of inheritance to give equal consideration to first born females shows how arbitrary such rules have become. The divine right of kings, the king as God's appointee, was the basis of societies feudal hierarchies up to the modern age. Then the sweep of democracy powered by the notion of the fundamental equality of individuals (even if some will always be more equal than others) fatally damaged the idea of kingship (and fatally damaged a few kings and royals too).

The feast of Christ the King was a belated attempt by the Church authorities to resist these tremors of modernity. For if monarchs who are divinely appointed can be overthrown by the forces of discontent what security had the authority of the divinely appointed pope? This was a time when the Papacy was still attempting to come to terms with the loss of the Papal States and virtually all temporal power. The Pope was 'a prisoner' (his word) in the Vatican and the Concordat with Mussolini, regularising the situation and creating the independent Vatican State, was still four years away. (1929) Still in force was the Syllabus of Errors condemning anyone who believed "that the Roman Pontiff can and should reconcile himself with progress, liberalization and recent civilization" (Error No. 80). In such a spirit the railway was banned from approaching the Vatican.

Perceiving this dire threat to the Successor of Peter, the Church instituted the Feast of Christ the King to remind the world of the might of kingship which is vested in God the Father who has placed his Son over every sovereignty, authority and power and whose Kingdom will never end.

Today's feast is a child of a previous age, old when it was conceived, it has quickly grown feeble and frail. Kingship is an alien concept in this twenty-first century.

That said, the prayers and readings of the feast, the ideas behind the celebration today tell a different story. The message we actually hear today is worthwhile at any time, in any age.

The Preface of today's Mass, the prayer before the 'Holy. Holy', is noteworthy. There we hear not just of Jesus kingship but of his priesthood. He is the eternal priest and universal King. The joining of these two concepts radically alters both, giving us a new idea which is far richer than either notion on its own.

Jesus is priest-king. A priest like no other priest; a king like no other king. As priest-king his sovereign authority comes through his being both the one who sacrifices (the role of the priest) and yet he is also the sacrifice itself. Kings generally sacrifice others; and while kings may die, kingship never dies - "The King is dead; Long live the King". But Jesus is Lord and King precisely because he dies. He has to die and so enter his glory. He has to be 'the acceptable sacrifice' which he himself offers as the eternal priest.

(Our middle stained-glass window on the left of the church depicts Christ as Priest-King, who is also prophet as he inaugurates the new Jerusalem as swords are turned into ploughshares.)

Moreover in addition to Priest-King (and prophet), in today's readings we hear of shepherds. In first century Palestine shepherds were as far removed as it was possible to be moved from purple clothes and palaces and the trappings of Kingship. Shepherds were scum; thieves and ne'er-do-wells. A shepherd-king is an oxymoron, a conjunction of irreconcilables, like military intelligence or courageous cowardice.

Here again both concepts are enriched by their coalescence. In fact, a new concept is formed whereby kingship, majesty, authority is achieved through what is despised; for the despicable finds nobility as he heroically gives his life for his sheep.

Here is kingship far removed from palaces and potentates, prestige and power. Here is majesty seen in what people despise. It is an authority based on servitude.

In the nature of Jesus' kingship as described in the readings and prayers of today's celebration, we have insight into the nature of God, the Holy Trinity. For each person of the Blessed trinity endlessly gives themselves wholly to each other; and in this self-giving each is totally fulfilled. It is such self-giving that the Gospel calls us to imitate. When we give ourselves totally, giving of our substance not our surplus, then we imitate God; then we are Christ-like. When our authority is grounded in service then we are kings in the manner of Christ's kingship.

Taken at face value this feast is a dusty museum piece, an out-of-date irrelevance. Properly understood, through the prayers and readings it is a relevant, vibrant celebration because it shows us the nature of God revealed in Christ, our priest-shepherd-king.