

Solemnity of Christ the King

Year A

Ez 34:11-12, 15-17

Ps 23:1-2, 2-3, 5-6

I Cor 15:20-26, 28

Mt 25:31-46

Mark A. Garrett, O.S.A.

What do you think? Would you like to be a king? Does being in charge sound nice? Getting to do whatever you want? Do you ever say, “If I were in charge, I’d...”?

Does royalty sound glamorous? Do you think it’d be fun to be a princess? A duke? A queen? A king? Do you remember the movies called *The Princess Diaries*? *King Ralph*? Does that sound good?

Well, if all that appeals to you, you’d better not look in the Bible for any helpful information. In fact, you’d better just avoid the Bible altogether – because what the Bible has to say doesn’t really jibe with that approach to royalty and kingship.

Consider what we heard today. The first reading talked about a shepherd – even though people maybe thought we’d be hearing about kings today.

There’s not much fun in that first reading – not much freedom to do what you want. The Lord talks about being a shepherd, one who always keep an eye on his flock, who rescues them from anything that would bring them harm, who hunts for them when they’re lost and provides attentive medical care when they need it.

The second reading goes even further. It talks about giving up one’s life, dying for one’s people. Is that the job description for a king? – going into death for someone else, in order to fight against death? And what about eliminating every oppressive sovereignty and negative power? That sounds like work, hard work.

And then, look what it says after that: just when you’ve won all those battles, you turn around and you surrender. You subject yourself to God the Father. Is that what we had in mind when we wanted to be king? What kind of a royalty is that?

Now look at the Gospel. It talks about the work of justice, pretty exacting work. To judge is fine, but in that Gospel it sounds like you wouldn’t get to do it in just whatever way you want. It sounds like a pretty tall order.

Plus, in that reading we heard the king identifying with the hungry, the needy, the sick, the imprisoned, the naked, the homeless. Whose idea of kingship is *that*?

Well, actually, here’s the problem: We’ve really just picked the wrong nation. Israel is a tough place to be king. We should have tried ancient Persia or Mesopotamia – or maybe even *recent* Persia and Mesopotamia, or ancient Egypt or the Roman Empire. It would be more fun to be king there. Not Israel. Absolute unrestrained power and royal prerogatives are foreign to Israel, foreign to the Bible, Old *and* New Testament.

In ancient Israel there were many limits on the king. In the first place, the Covenant Israel had with Yahweh was a covenant with *all* the people; the king was just as much subject to God as anyone else – very different from, say, ancient Egypt or Persia, where the king effectively was god, or at very least the visible representation of the divine.

For the nations that surrounded old Israel, the royal dynasties dated from time immemorial: it had always been like that. Israel itself had a very different experience: at a particular and identifiable point in

its history, Israel *began* to have a king. That was, by some accounts, a very human and intentional step. It had *not* always been like that. The people of Israel chose to make it like that. How could the king, then, get away with serving only his own interests? (Some did try. The Bible has some pretty nasty things to say about *those* kings.)

David, the model of all Israelite kingship, remained subject to God – and God’s prophet, Nathan, once rebuked him strongly for imperious and unethical conduct. But often David would remember, on his own, that he was – just as everyone else – subject to God. As the Ark of the Covenant was being brought into Jerusalem, King David danced before the Ark in worship of God – and his wife complained bitterly that he was acting like a commoner, not like a king. But she was judging by the standards of pagan kings who thought they were too important to be seen so openly and vulnerably worshiping God.

No, if we want to lord it over people, Israel has the wrong model of kingship for us. In fact, we’d better avoid the whole Bible.

Christ is part of that same Biblical tradition. Even though he could rightly claim divinity as the Near Eastern kings could not, he goes even further than David his ancestor.

Look at the readings we’ve just heard – about Christ the King. What job description for king do you find there? A shepherd who cares deeply for his sheep and works hard at caring for them. Someone willing to die – to go to battle against death and against earthly notions of power – and, when he has won, at the cost of his own life, then he *surrenders*. In the Gospel he identifies with all the oppressed, downtrodden, and disadvantaged – all the have-nots of the world. Is that a king?

Well, it *is* the kind of king the Bible wants. It is the kind of king Christ is.

As we begin the Eucharistic Prayer in a few minutes, listen to the Preface. It’s the Preface for Christ the King. Notice what is connected with kingship there: Christ as victim, Christ himself as sacrifice offered to God, Christ the Shepherd laying down his life for his flock.

Well, the *good* news for us is that we are that flock: Christ gives all that he has, all that he is, for us. In that process he conquers death and fills us with life. That’s a wonderful realization for us – very good news.

The other news – (Bad news? No, but challenging news.) – is that we are called to follow that King, to live like that King. We are called to exercise our authority in this world in the same way Christ did.

What authority? Well, authority over people we supervise, over our employees, over our students, over our family, our kids – even our authority over our little brothers and sisters when Mom asks us to baby-sit them. And all those who are even temporarily dependent on us: people who wait on us in a restaurant, who drive with us on the highway, who work beside us in the office, store, factory. And any kids who can be vulnerable to how we adults treat them – in school, in the home, on athletic fields, in the Church. People here and around the world who need our care, our generosity, our respect.

We’re not kings of Persia; we’re not pharaohs of Egypt. We are Christians. We, like the humbler kings of Israel and Judah, recognize that we are under God – as David did. For Christ, whom we follow, is the loving shepherd and the victim who sacrificed himself on the cross. He is our model.

We are called to be kings just the way Christ was – and is.