

CHRIST OUR KING IS NOT FOUND AMONG EARTHLY WEALTH AND SPLENDOUR

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Recently, I saw the digitally reworked film of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation. This was British ritual at its most brilliant. The sense of flow, dignity and beauty was quite overwhelming. I was struck by how this rite mirrored the ordination of a bishop. It has a call, oaths, the reception of the Scriptures, the Liturgy of the Word, recitation of the Creed, an anointing, the presentation of the symbols of office leading up to the crowning, the acclamation by the people, an enthroning, the homage of the subjects, Holy Communion, the Te Deum and then the Recessional.

It was made explicitly clear that Christ was anointing Elizabeth Alexandra Mary "to govern the Peoples of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Union of South Africa, Pakistan, and Ceylon, and of your Possessions and the other Territories ..."

As I watched, however, I became increasingly uncomfortable. While everything was said to be done in Christ's name, I could only think that Christ would prefer to be anywhere but here. For millennia, in ceremonies like this all around the world, Christ's kingship is often called upon to confirm that God approves of not only this particular monarch or that particular president, but also of the entire social, economic and religious hierarchy that seems to go with the institution of the state.

Following on from Jesus saying he was a king, "but not of this world", Christians celebrated his reign as that of the Messiah, or the Christ literally – "the anointed one", the Redeemer King who would defend the rights of the poor, and establish an everlasting reign of justice and peace.

The notion of Jesus as an earthly king and an anointer of earthly kingdoms came with the conversion of Emperor Constantine in AD 313. Bishops started to wear the magenta robes of Roman senators. Churches took on the shape of Roman basilicas, while the government of the Church came to mirror that of the empire. The Christian liturgy imported all sorts of practices popular in the Roman temples and in civic rituals.

Within a century, Christian art began to depict Jesus dressed in royal robes, with a crown, a sceptre and an orb. Mary is often presented in similar dress, and starts to be called the Queen of Heaven; by the high medieval period she is often cloaked in blue, the prerogative of kings at the time.

We cannot change history, but we do not have to be trapped by it either. In the very Scriptures given into our monarch's hands we discover Christ our king is not found among earthly wealth and splendour, but in desperate poverty, in homelessness, in seeking out and saving the lost, in getting down and dirty in the service of those on the margins of society. I am not convinced such groups would be welcome or at home in the lavish coronation ceremonies conducted in Christ the King's name in the Westminster Abbeys of our world.

If we take Christ's kingship seriously, we cannot delude ourselves into understanding it in terms of worldly status. Jesus said, if any of us want to be first, we have to be least, and the servant of all. I admire the lifetime of privileged service our queen has rendered and her obvious and sincere Christian faith, but Christ does not anoint any social or ecclesiastical system of privilege and wealth that is extravagant or disordered in its social relationships.

The most moving moment when Jesus speaks of his kingship is from the Cross, when the good thief simply asks: "Remember me." Jesus replies that being remembered by God is paradise. The power of Christ the King is seen in his memory, in holding every person in this world close; in calling each one of us by name and challenging us to live lives of sacrificial love. It is seen where simplicity is valued, where there is a right relationship with the Earth, where the poor are recognised as special points of God's revelation to the world.

The test of those who live out the reign of Christ is not whether we are successful, or have made it to Who's Who. Christ our king calls us to follow him in remembering all people, regardless of who they are, and being prepared to pay the price in fighting for the dignity of each person. And what is our reward for bringing Christ's reign to bear in our world? That Christ will remember us when we come into his kingdom.

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