

Christ the King

The Last Sunday after Pentecost (Christ the King). Year A, RCL, Track 2. November 26, 2017. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

We Americans are about as far from understanding what kings are like as Western civilization has ever gotten. We find them fascinating—queens, too; the royal family of Britain gets a fair amount of attention over here. But we don't really get it. We have a class system in the United States, but it's based on wealth and influence, not on family lineage. The old system of kings and princes and earls and dukes and so on has faded into the historical background.

So we've forgotten what it's like to have to rely on the genetic roulette wheel to produce—hopefully—someone qualified to lead the government of a country, and even, in the old days, to lead its army in battle. We've forgotten what it's like to have a king (or queen) who has no aptitude or desire for the job but has to take it simply because they are the next in line. Or who gets sick and never gets well, while the government falls apart around them. Or who prefers to be off adventuring in foreign lands instead of taking care of business at home. Or who oppresses the common people, or engages in endless infighting with the nobility, or spends vast amounts of time and resources in idle diversions.

When the ancient Israelites asked God to provide them with a king, just like everybody else had, the prophet Samuel shook his head and said, "Guys, you just don't know what you're getting into. Are you sure you want this kind of authority figure in charge?" (1 Samuel 8) But they kept asking, and they got Saul and David and Solomon and the whole glorious, bloody, foolish, fierce, and fainthearted bunch of

them. Kings do not come off all that well, overall, in the Bible.

This Sunday, we celebrate Christ the King. We are not celebrating Jesus according to the biblical picture of a king, or according to the understanding of kingship we have inherited from the Middle Ages. We are stretching the word “king” beyond its human limitations to refer to the Lord of Creation, enthroned in glory, who nevertheless bears upon his body the marks of crucifixion, a criminal’s death: an execution at the hands of the servants of an emperor who would not put up with any rival.

And that is the issue, isn’t it? Do we serve the distorted glory of our own selfishness writ large—projected onto the heavens, the sound and light show of pride—or do we serve the King who never counted equality with his heavenly Father a thing to be clung to (Philippians 2:6), who spent most of his life in obscurity as a carpenter in a small town, who called ordinary folks his friends, and who said he came among us as one who serves?

The glory of God has been made known to us in the dust of the road, in the touch of a healing hand, in sharing a simple meal, in the rough wood of a cross. We are the King’s friends, but he is not like any king we could ever be—unless we decide to be like him: unless we say *no* to our pride, say *no* to our grasping, say *no* to our violence, take up our cross, and follow him. or spends vast amounts of time and resources in idle diversions,