

We've heard a lot about kings in the readings this morning, and the collect names Jesus "King of kings and Lord of lords." Today is the Last Sunday after Pentecost, celebrated as the Feast of Christ the King.

That image, of Christ as King, may seem outmoded, a tradition adopted from ancient Israel, whose king was YHWH, and the early Church that saw Jesus as king, but perhaps not very helpful today. This is a time when trust in governments and those who govern, at home and abroad, is pretty low, whatever the form of government may be. To Americans, certainly, the notion of a king isn't all that appealing. After all, we are a nation formed by rebellion *against* a king.

As for our cultural imagination about royalty, that runs more to princesses than kings, in fairy tales (and Disney movies) like "Sleeping Beauty" and "Cinderella," and the new movie just released for the holidays, in which a princess is somehow launched into modern day Manhattan. There is always a prince in the story whose destiny is to love, adore and marry the beautiful princess. The story is all about "happily-ever-after," not weighed down with the burdens of governing, and how best to protect the well-being and safety of the people.

We may remember stories of truly great kings: King Arthur, with his knights of the round table; King Richard, the Lionheart, who with Robin Hood rescued the people of Britain from wicked King John and set the kingdom right again. Much of what we know, or think we know, about them may be more legend than history. But they *do* represent an ideal of the king: fair and just, the protector of the weak against would-be oppressors, who uses his absolute power to take care of the people, never to exploit them.

In biblical times, Israel was ruled by her own kings for not quite 500 years, before the exile to Babylon. The history of those kings was almost always troubled and did not end well. Israel's first kings were Saul, David and David's son, Solomon. Though David himself was not perfect, he was beloved of God and became the ideal, held up as the standard for kingship in Israel ever after.

When Solomon died, there was a bloody fight for power, and the kingdom was divided in two for two hundred years. Then the northern kingdom (Israel) was conquered and carried off into exile, never to return.

About 140 years later, the south (Judah and Jerusalem) was also conquered. All the powerful and talented people were carried into exile in Babylon. The prophet Jeremiah was there when it happened. He lived through the fall and destruction of Jerusalem. To the end, he warned kings and their advisors of what was coming, but they would not listen.

The trouble was that both kings and people believed that Jerusalem would never be conquered. God lived there, after all, in the temple. God loved David and the holy city of

Jerusalem. And people and kings remembered and believed without a doubt that God would keep a king from the house of David on the throne forever. (Cf., 2 Sam. 7:14-16; Ps. 89:24-37). No matter what—which meant no matter what the king did or did not do.

It turned out that even kings of the line of David have to obey the Lord and rule with justice and righteousness (*see*, Jer. 22:3). Even the holy city of Jerusalem could and did fall. God’s love for King David was no protection against the mistakes and misdeeds of the kings who followed.

Jerusalem was destroyed , shattered like a clay pot, that cannot be put back together again (Jer. 19:11). And the longing and the promises for restoration began. Judah and Israel, in exile, and the Lord himself, longed for a people who had been scattered and lost like sheep to be brought home to live in safety. As the whole world still longs for things to be set right, everywhere: refugees, prisoners and captives, soldiers and their families, the sick, the hungry, the poor, the homeless. Even creation itself, “groaning in labor pains,” longs to “be set free from its bondage to decay” (Romans 8:21, 22).

In Jeremiah, the Lord himself promised to gather those people and bring them home, and that one day there would be a new king from the line of David who would “deal wisely and execute righteousness in the land.” He would bring back together the divided and scattered kingdoms of Israel and Judah. (Jer. 23:5-6)

But the promise turned out to be more than setting up a descendant of King David on a throne in Jerusalem. Centuries later, the followers of Jesus saw in *him* the image of this king, a righteous Branch from the line of David. (*cf.*, Luke 1:32) Later still, the author of the letter to the Colossians saw that Jesus as king brought peace and healing not only for Israel and Judah, but for all the world: “For . . . through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.” (Col. 1:20)

What of this image of Jesus as King? Is it still a helpful image for the Church in the world today? I think it is.

Political leaders, even those with the best plans and intentions, are flawed because they’re human. They sometimes make bad judgments and mistakes, and they disappoint their subjects or constituents, all the time. Sometimes they do more than disappoint us, and cause real damage. Their failure is inevitable, to some degree, if only because the needs and problems of nations and between nations are so complex, and have been going on for so long. Governing and diplomacy are really hard.

If you’ve been following the news of the one-day peace conference scheduled for Tuesday in Annapolis, you’ve seen this in spades. With such a long history of violence, enmity and injustice between Israelis and Palestinians, and so many neighboring and other countries with interests on one side or the other, or interests of their very own, it’s hard to get the parties together even for one day, to talk about talking about a peace deal. And this is only one of the explosive and dangerous conflicts in the world at the moment.

When things seem to be coming apart, and even the best intentioned world leaders can't make much headway toward peace, one ruler, over all, a King of kings and Lord of lords begins to look promising. There is real assurance in the image of Christ, over all, before all, and for all, in whom all things hold together (Col. 1:17). Absolute power, over everything, could be a good thing when things are in a really big mess.

Still, it is important to know what kind of king, to be able to have confidence that all will be well. Today, we look to Luke, and see there a disturbing image of Jesus, a surprising one, perhaps on this day when we celebrate Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords,. Nailed on a cross, he appears to be helpless and defeated. That, certainly, was the assumption of the leaders of the people and the Roman soldiers who taunted and ridiculed him. “*You* are a savior? *You* are a king? *Save* yourself, if you can!” Even one of the criminals crucified with him sneered, “You’re supposed to be the *Messiah*? *Do* something!” He simply does not look credible as a king, is something of an embarrassment, really.

And yet, one who was there saw something very different: not defeat, but hope and promise. He not only recognized that Jesus was innocent, he also believed that Jesus was a king with a kingdom. But he is a king who turns the whole idea of king on its head, who is different from any other. This king came not to be served but to serve, not to conquer by force or violence but to win us by love, and restore us to God, ourselves, and our neighbor .

Who knows when that man, the second criminal, had last prayed, if ever. But he prayed then, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” He said this believing that Jesus had and would have power and a kingdom. Though they both would die, he believed that being remembered by Jesus would be the answer to the prayer his heart had held all his life. Jesus answered that prayer, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Even at the end, Jesus was welcoming an outcast into the kingdom of God.

Before we conclude that King Jesus and his kingdom are strictly other worldly, and only after death, though, let's remember how he began his ministry in this world. In the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus unrolled the scroll and read:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Lk. 4:18-19)

In the Gospel according to John, Jesus said to Pilate, “My kingdom is not from this world” (Jn. 18:36). Not *from* this world, but active in it. King Jesus and his kingdom are very much rooted in this world and concerned with justice and compassion. As his disciples, we are anointed in baptism to be his agents of justice and compassion in the world. In him, you see, God already “has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col. 1:13)

The image of Jesus as King of kings may be incongruous for this day and age, but *we* are *part* of it. It was at least as strange and threatening in first century Palestine, when kings and emperors were simply the way things were. There’s still no getting around it—he is a king with a *difference*, and that still makes *all* the difference.