

Dear Friends,

To judge from magazines and television there is never any lack of interest in the doings of the members of our royal family, both here and in other countries that no longer have a royal family. The interest seems to have grown as royalty has ceased to have any real power and the cult of celebrity has taken over. This is one reason why so many people admire Queen Elizabeth herself, as she has kept herself and her personality firmly out of the limelight and devoted herself to a life of service. Her Christmas broadcasts show her also to be a person of strong religious faith. I must admit I feel a soft spot for Prince Charles when he is criticised for abusing his position by speaking out on current issues: if you agree with what he says about architecture or organic farming, you may be glad that he does!

For most of our history kings and queens were remote, semi-divine beings whom we knew little about except that they really did have the power of life and death over their subjects and the power to impose taxes to finance their wars and lavish life-style. It was necessary therefore and sensible to keep on their right side by constant flattery and attention. They were like the old gods and goddesses of ancient pagan religion: super-powerful beings who could disrupt your life and cause you endless trouble, and might well do so at any moment for no particular reason. They had no special interest in or concern for human beings, except to make sure they were paid due deference and homage. This is the purpose of sacrifice in the ancient religion: give the gods something they will enjoy in order to keep them quiet and on your side - at least for the time being!

I think you can see that something of this attitude has survived into our Christian faith and the way we approach God. Ever since the emperor Constantine became a Christian, around the year 312 A.D., and made Christianity the official state religion of his empire, God has been seen (to some extent) like a Roman emperor - all-powerful, divine and eternal. How many of our traditional prayers start by addressing him in that way! The assumption is that he will not naturally favour us, so we have to appease him, buy his favour by flattery and divert his possible anger or displeasure at us by offerings and sacrifices.

This view of seeing God is remarkably persistent and has always been at variance with a true Christian understanding, which is why we need to keep coming back to the person of Christ and what he shows us of God. The parables we have been reading through this year tell of a God who is infinite love and compassion, who gives himself over and over for his people and seeks only that they respond to him with love. One of my favourites is the labourers in the vineyard who all get paid the same wage no matter how long they have worked - because the master chooses to be generous. He wants what is best for his people.

When we speak of Christ as king, therefore, we are not speaking of a king whose power is seen in domination and oppression, but rather in loving service. This becomes very clear when we hear the parable of the sheep and goats as the Gospel reading of this Sunday. We see Christ and serve God in him above all when we show compassion for those in great need: the hungry, the thirsty, the lonely, the sick, those in prison. These little ones are especially dear to God

precisely because they are powerless, they can only receive help from others, all they can give is their gratitude. In relation to God we are all in that position, dependent on him for all we are and all we have and able to give him nothing but our thanks.

When Pope John Paul visited this country he celebrated the sacraments at different locations and I remember words he spoke when administering anointing of the sick at Southwark cathedral. He said we should keep the sick in our midst and not push them out to the margins, because they are such a great sign to us of the need we all have for God's healing and transforming love.

The feast of Christ the King is a fairly recent addition to our calendar. When it was instituted in 1925 it was to take place on the last Sunday of October, and so would immediately precede the feast of All Saints, those who we believe to be already sharers in God's kingdom. In the 1970s it was moved to its present position as the final Sunday of the Church's year before the new year begins again with Advent. Both positions make sense, but maybe there is a particular significance in celebrating the kingship of Christ at the end of the year: it is a reminder of our central vocation as God's people to share his power of love and show that love to others, the vocation we are called to live in this and every year.

When we are baptised we are anointed with the oil of chrism, which is used at confirmation and also at coronations: the new monarch is anointed with this oil. Baptised into the new life of the risen Lord we take on his threefold ministry - to be priests, prophets and kings: to make God known in our world and speak his word and in so doing exercise the royal power he has that is seen above all in love and service.

I pray that this celebration will give us hope and inspiration to continue our Christian journey in these strange times when we feel so much adrift, but know we can only find true refuge in the loving heavenly Father whose human face we see in our Lord and Saviour.

Wishing you every blessing, Fr. Robin

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