

In December, 1925, in the long shadow of the Great War, and after the pleasant distraction that was the Paris Olympics, with its heroic headline-grabbing achievements by Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams, the then-Pope, Pius XI, issued a statement – *Quam Primas* – in which he declared that the last Sunday in October would mark its observance; since 1970, the Sunday next before Advent has been kept as the feast of Christ the King..

It wasn't established as a feast day just to give the Church something more to do (and the Anglican Church, along with the Lutherans and the Methodists, soon picked up the feast, too), or to fatten up a too-lean liturgical calendar; but because he and his counsellors believed that the frightening rise of Communism and militant atheism in governments *had* to have a Christian response. Therefore, the Church was asked to consider deeply what it means to call Jesus Christ, 'King'. Pius wrote: 'And We remember saying that these manifold evils in the world were due to the fact that the majority of men had thrust Jesus Christ and his holy law out of their lives; that these had no place either in private affairs or in politics: and we said further, that as long as individuals and states refused to submit to the rule of our Saviour, there would be no really hopeful prospect of a lasting peace among nations.' Its intent, while pastoral, was heavy-handed, even imperious in part: 'To use the words of Our immortal predecessor, Pope Leo XIII: "His [Christ's] empire includes not only Catholic nations, not only baptized persons who, though of right belonging to the Church, have been led astray by error, or have been cut off from her by schism, but also all those who are outside the Christian faith; so that truly the whole of mankind is subject to the power of Jesus Christ."'

The irony in this call to meditate and act on the kingship of Christ – however that is to be imagined and shaped – ought not be lost on us. For centuries, beginning perhaps with Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge in 312 CE, the Christian faith has found itself intertwined with power and privilege, fascinated by its structures, and has seen the Kingdom of Heaven conceived of in profoundly this-worldly terms; we are inheritors of a Crusader legacy that dogs us still in the contemporary conversation with Jews and Muslims. Perhaps it was the rise of Reason and the triumph of scientific method (Pius named it as 'anticlericalism') that dislodged the fascination with kingdom and rule, and sent Christ packing back to heaven where every despot from Pilate to Peron would prefer him to be; or perhaps the Church soured of the taste of conflict and conquest, and of the sight of mounds of

Christian dead, where the victors were themselves in many instances, ostensibly Christian. In our experience I suspect that serious fascination with the notion of Christ as king, and of the all-conquering reign of God, is limited to those whom we regard as sectarian door-knockers, or adolescent, triumphalist hand-wavers: for our part, we're probably a little embarrassed by it all.

Yet it won't go away, this idea that somehow, in some sphere, Christ is to be styled 'king'. Its excision from both the Fourth Gospel, and the Revelation, would leave a considerable gap – not only in literary volume, but also in theological substance. Without any apparent embarrassment, John the Divine declared – within a clearly Trinitarian framework – Jesus Christ to be the model, the proto-martyr, the organic link with the future hope, and the 'ruler of earthly kings'. The arena for each of these hard-won functions was to be the here-and-now, a particular present with its own unique historic realities and trials: while much of the theatrical backdrop of the Revelation may be heaven, the drama is played out on the lots and mean streets of earth.

Our forebears in the faith understood it well enough, especially in the first clashes of the early centuries between the Roman Empire and the emerging Church: they knew that this-worldly consequences turned upon the answer to the key question, *Who is Lord?* This was more than 'merely' the great baptismal question, but rather a confession of faith and allegiance that carried dangerous political, this-worldly implications. As early as the year 156 CE, the Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, was urged by the Chief Constable of the city, on the eve of Polycarp's death by burning in the stadium of that great city, with a reasonable, rhetorical question, 'What harm is there in saying "Caesar is Lord", and sacrificing [to Caesar], and the rest of it, and so saving yourself?' (*The Martyrdom of Polycarp*). The problem was that Caesar (now a title) had been proclaimed *Dominus et Deus*, 'Lord and God'. This, then, was a fatal collision of the kingdoms – Caesar's and Christ's. Christian faith had become unavoidably political, dealing as it did (and does) with the well-being of the polis, the city.

I suspect, too, that many in the so-called Confessing Church - in the face of the rise of National Socialism and the 'German Christian' experience - understood it, too, when Hitler's claims to lordship could no longer be dissembled and disguised. The Barmen Declaration of 1933 pointed to a very this-worldly collision when it pronounced that, 'We reject the false doctrine, as though *the State*, over and beyond its special commission, should and could

become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the Church's vocation as well. We reject the false doctrine, as though *the Church*, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the State.'

Perhaps, then, there are salutary reminders inherit in your feast of title: the first, that Christ *has* been declared king in the triumph of God, but that – as becomes clear upon a close reading of the exchange between Jesus and Pilate (who knew a thing or two about rule and power) – his kingdom is not *from* this world. It is a statement about the origin of authority, and not the sphere of its influence. Secondly, that to declare Christ 'king' bears its own responsibilities, foremost among which is not to confuse human rule and method with God's, as if the two were synonymous and indistinguishable: the Church is at its worst when it apes the power structures of this world, preferring temporal effect and influence to the kingdom that does not derive its authority *from* this world. Thirdly, if the risen Christ, once described in the book of Revelation as the Lion of the tribe of Judah who has triumphed, yet who is ever after recognised as the *Agnes Dei*, the Lamb 'bearing the marks of slaughter', then the means by which this kingdom is made finally irresistible and restorative have nothing to do with raw power or force of arms, the limitless power to coerce, but rather the way of the cross, the end of sacred violence, and the ultimately invincible power of divine love found in the Trinity, and which washes out across creation. This is where the feast of Christ the King directs our gaze, and thereby shapes our action: to the Lamb, 'looking as if it had been slain, standing in the centre of the throne of God...

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