

Christ is king

While I was pastor of St. Louis Parish in Memphis, we undertook an extensive renovation of the church, which included the addition of sculptures depicting scenes in the life of our patron, King Louis IX of France, the beloved king who reigned from 1226–1270. One sculpture, “The Just and Humble King,” shows ordinary people approaching Louis to seek judgments in personal disputes, since he was known for his impartiality.

Once I gave a visiting priest a tour of the church, and when he passed that sculpture, he read the caption aloud but added a question: “A just and humble king. Isn’t that an oxymoron?”

For the most part, our view of kings, queens and emperors depends on what country and what century we live in, or whose version of history we read. There have been good kings and queens and bad ones, good ones with moments of brutality, bad ones with moments of compassion.

In the first century A.D., as the New Testament was taking shape, kings and queens were not a popular bunch; after all, those were the days of the Herods and the Caesars. Even so, when it came to the long-term memory and hopes of the people of Israel, the image of king held great importance.

The people reasoned that if God had done remarkable things through kings and queens in glorious moments of their past — often despite their sinfulness — he would do so again. There was always reason for hope, because the true king of the universe is God himself.

Whatever manner of kings and rulers pass through a moment of history, God is still the king of all time and of all the world. God is so fully and uniquely the ruler of all that he can even use sinful men and women as instruments of his will.

St. Paul was aware that among the Christian community at Colossae there were teachers who distorted the Christian message and denied the unique supremacy of Jesus Christ. Apparently they spoke of angels with associations to astral powers and cultic practices, not unlike certain “New Age” ideas of today.

Paul realized that this talk was not compatible with Christian faith because it detracted from belief in Christ as Lord,



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and he set things straight. We believe that Christ existed before time and will exist for all eternity, he wrote; we believe that everything that exists came to be through him; he is God’s own image; he is God himself; Christ is secondary to nothing and no one, and in fact

everything exists for him.

There is nothing, no one, “whether those on earth or those in heaven,” that is not under his rule (see Col 1:15–20).

He rescued us

In Colossians 1:3, Paul writes that God *rescued* (delivered) us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son. We were in a desperate situation, and we did not have the power to save ourselves, so he rescued us.

Luke relates that one of the criminals hanging on a cross next to Jesus joined in the mockery of the crowds: “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us.”

But the other criminal spoke a word of faith: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” A sinner recognized that Jesus was a king whose reign is eternal.

In response, Jesus said, “Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Just as Paul told the Colossians, here was a case where God rescued a man who had been under the power of darkness and brought him to his kingdom.

Tradition has named this rescued sinner Dismas, but we usually refer to him with an oxymoron: “The Good Thief.”

God rescues sinners — sinners like Louis, like David, like Paul, like Dismas, like me — and places us in the kingdom of his Son, through whom everything that is came to be. He takes the fragile, mixed bag of stuff of which we’re made, the contradictions that war within us,

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and the mess we often make of things, and rescues us from the power of darkness through his Son — and calls us to live in a way that befits his reign.

Christ alone is Lord

Perhaps at times we’re uncomfortable with the royal imagery used in Scripture and Christian history because it seems to contradict our American sense of egalitarianism and democracy (as if God would have to ask our permission to be king!).

The danger for us is to think that God’s reign is simply image and not reality. Discipleship involves submitting ourselves humbly to him and letting the Gospel be the sole guide of our lives, no matter who the earthly rulers happen to be in our age.

Do I live in such a way as to give evidence that Christ alone is my Lord and King?

“May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call, what are the riches of glory in his inheritance among the holy ones, and what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe, in accord with the exercise of his great might, which he worked in Christ, raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens, far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion, and every name that is named not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things beneath his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.” (Eph 1:18–23)

We celebrate the solemnity of Christ the King this Sunday. It matters not which image of royalty we hold or which opinion of rulers we have formed. What matters is this: Does my life give evidence that Christ alone is Lord and King? He rescues sinners and chooses the weak to accomplish his plan.

As this Sunday’s preface proclaims, his is “a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace.” He has made us all “good thieves.”