

He has forgotten us? (John 18: 33-37)

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The Feast of Christ the King is a relatively new addition to the liturgical calendar. It was instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius IX, ostensibly to mark the close of a Year of Jubilee, but also in an effort to counter the decline of religion and the spread of secularism in the west. The Feast was an opportunity to affirm the all-embracing authority of Christ.

Except that for many of us there's something problematic in the whole notion of 'sovereignty' and 'kingship' – and words like 'rule' and 'reign' aren't much better. Although in our context, we might imagine a dignified, largely benign public functionary, in other times and places, the king could be a demanding and ruthless tyrant. And in either case, kings tend to be associated with courts and acolytes, with command and armies, pomp and above all privilege. Kings, queens, royal families enjoy or (some might say) are entrapped by the attribution of a quasi-sacred meaning that raises them above the rest of us, and makes them endlessly fascinating to gossipy magazines. There's something fundamentally archaic and inegalitarian about it all. So with this sense of things in the background, what does it mean to proclaim *Christ* as king?

You don't have to read far in the gospels to discover that his reign is more often portrayed as a subversion, rather than an affirmation of the notions I've just been describing. Yes, he is described as Lord and rightly owed allegiance – the presence of no less than God active in the world. And yet, as Jesus is at pains to communicate in today's reading, he is not like other kings. Indeed, the very title was one he seemed reticent to accept. When Pilate quizzed him about kingship, he was coy. *'My kingdom is not from this world'*, he replied. *'If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over*

to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.' Whatever it is, Christ's dominion is not exercised in the usual manner. If we think of his context, it's even more obvious. He'd been arrested and accused, and was now being scrutinised by the imperial power of Rome. It was clearly an unjust process, and yet he submitted. He endured misrepresentation, humiliation and torture, willingly took up the cross, willingly gave his life. As we sometimes sing in hymns, Jesus's crown was a crown of thorns, his throne a cross. If Christ is a king, then it's a very different kingship we're talking about.

So again, what does it *mean* to proclaim Christ as king? In the iconography of Eastern Orthodoxy, the kingship of Jesus is customarily portrayed by the image of the Pantocrator – two versions of which you received with your service sheet. The Greek word Παντοκράτωρ means 'ruler of all'. If you've ever visited an Orthodox church, you may well have seen a mosaic of the Pantocrator in the highest central dome. Smaller versions are available in any shop that sells icons (it's hardly the central dome, but there's one down there!).

In essence, the Pantocrator is a piece of visual theology – a visible representation of the kingship of Christ. Which is to say, a visible representation of faith's understanding that he is the one to whom all must ultimately answer. On the left of your page you have one of the earliest versions of this icon. Notice the authoritative face, the hands, and those eyes... looking directly at you ... into you.

By the middle ages, there was a clear pattern for portraying this image. Christ wears a blue overmantle and ochre tunic, the book of the gospels held in his left hand, his right raised slightly in a gesture of teaching and blessing. There's a halo around his head, enclosing a cross and often the Greek words, 'ho ōn' – 'the existing one'. The Greek abbreviation ΙΧ ΧC is also frequently included – *Iēsous Christos*. Many of these features are already evident in this early 6thC version.

Now, at one level, this looks much like kingship in the typical 'worldly' sense – Christ portrayed as ruler and judge. The eyes seem to expose you, at least at first. If you're like me, you want to look away. But if you stay with it, the gaze

softens, and you sense compassion, as if he's seeing us as we really are... and loving us. His judgement not condemnation; more an invitation to be known – there's acceptance and welcome in this gaze. Here is a king who walks beside us, invites us to be *with* him and so learn to be *with* ourselves.

His authority is different too. It comes neither from hereditary entitlement nor from having seized power. Christ's authority is the authority of reality itself. There's no need to fight to secure a place or convince anyone. He is 'ho òn', the existing one, the embodiment of Being – 'I am'. We can deny reality, fail to recognise it when it's in front of us. But sooner or later, the consequences of our evasion and falsification become apparent, as is happening with climate change. In John's record of the trial, Pilate asked (somewhat cynically): 'What is truth?' In this icon, truth stands before us; truth gazes upon us; truth invites our allegiance. To proclaim Christ as king is to recognise him as our touchstone, our rule of life – it's to enter into *relation* with him and so with the truth (the reality) to which he testifies.

Well, if this is what's communicated in this first icon, what of the second? After all I've said about the general pattern of the Pantocrator, what strikes you about this famous example from Daphni?

Christ seems older here, his face more drawn, his brow furrowed as if carrying a great weight. His eyes are not looking at us, but away to the side (the perspective strangely distorted). Instead of holding the book with serene authority, he '[clutches] it with long desperate fingers.' His lowered right hand 'imparts no teaching, communicates no blessing.' There's something unsettling about all this. He seems unsettled. In the words of Australian theologian, Ben Myers, he 'neglects to hold the official pose of a benevolent Pantocrator'. What's this about?

One person who's wrestled with this is Rowan Williams, former archbishop of Canterbury. In 1994 he penned a poem, the words of which are on your sheet:

Pantocrator: Daphni

*Pillars of dusty air beneath the dome
of golden leaden sky strain to bear up
his sweaty heaviness, his bulging eyes
drawn inwards to their private pain,
his hands arthritic with those inner knots,
his blessing set aside.
He has forgotten us, this once,
and sees a black unvisitable place
where from all ages he will die
and cry, creating in his blood
congealing galaxies of heat and weight.
Why should he bless or need an open book?
We know the words as well as he,
the names, Alpha, Omega,
fire from fire, we know your cry
out of the dusty golden whirlwind, how you forget
us so we can be.*

You may recognise images here from the book of Job and TS Eliot's *Four Quartets* (God speaking from the whirlwind, the phrase 'fire from fire'). Like the icon itself, it's a poem we could sit with for a long time. A brief reflection – starting with the eyes. Where's Christ looking, and why such heaviness? For Williams, he '*sees a black unvisitable place/ where from all ages he will die...*' Where else could this be but 'the abyssal horror of Gethsemane and Golgotha' (Myers). In this moment, Myers writes, 'we are eavesdroppers on a pain that is older than the world'. In this moment, Williams suggests, he *forgets* us just this once.

This statement brings us up with a jolt. If we stay with it, though, (like staying with the gaze in the first image) a deeper sense emerges. Yes, Christ has 'forgotten' us. We're not in the forefront of his focus. But, in the larger scheme, this 'forgetting' is part of his remembering. For this 'black unvisitable place' is where he must go, what he must pass through, to liberate us from the unreality (and systems of unreality) that bind and ultimately destroy – 'you forget/us so that we can be', Williams writes.

So, two icons of the Pantocrator, each showing us important truth about what it means to proclaim Christ as king. The first conveys him as all-seeing judge – but his steady eyes look from the place of compassion and acceptance, bestowing the relief of being seen and loved. We come to the truth of ourselves and realise we are still held. He is the Christ who is with us. The second conveys the Christ who is for us – his gaze fixed the way he must go if we're to be set free for true relationship – with him, with ourselves, with one another and all creation. What this icon powerfully communicates is that Christ the king, ruler of all, does not oppress or use us or make us sycophants. Rather by his undefended, self-giving way of being, he makes a way for us to follow, a way that leads through the darkness of unreality to a place where all are honoured, where life is shared and blessed. It's in this light, then, that we may proclaim: 'let the heavens be glad and the earth rejoice; let them say among the nations, 'The Lord reigns!'

References

Myers, B (2012) *Christ The Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams*, T & T Clark, London.

Williams, R (2002) *The Poems of Rowan Williams*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.