

## Christ the King Sunday

Nov. 21, 2010

Bethesda, New Haven

*O Christ, what can it mean for us to claim you as our King?  
We sit at your feet, King Jesus, at the foot of your throne... the cross...  
to ponder what it could possibly mean...  
to claim your power,  
to live into your kingdom and make it our own.*

*Lift us up, Lord Christ.*

*Lift us up to your cross.*

*Teach us there. Redeem us there.*

*Draw us to yourself... and into the heart of God...*

*in your holy name we pray... amen.*

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There's been talk of a royal wedding lately... it's big in the news... have you heard it?  
Britain's Prince William and his bride-to-be Kate Middleton  
announced last Tuesday that 2011 will be the year  
for the next royal wedding, a wedding which will break the mold.  
It will be the first wedding in 300 years to involve a "commoner".  
Yes, supposedly breaking the mold, since Kate has no blue-blooded title,  
though this "commoner" comes from an uncommonly wealthy family.

Rarely do we talk of things royal.

The only commonly-used phrase I can come up with is "royal pain"

(Can anybody think of any others? – field answers)

Using royal imagery at all can be problematic, especially when we talk of "kings"  
which imply maleness and often stereotypical masculinity...

And positive memories of good kings are few and far between.

But I think that today's feast and today's readings urge us to risk

walking through that minefield,

to consider Christ's royalty in a way that can tackle the power of the stereotypes  
and get beyond them.

There was just such talk of royalty on the blogosphere this past week,

on the blog for the online ministry of which I am a part, called "by the way".

I invited Bethesda member, Ben Groth, to write this past week,  
and was delighted when Ben, in considering what the kingship of Christ means  
in a country that rarely talks of things royal, ushered us into  
the royal Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the land he recently visited,  
which has a “real” king, a king who rules and commands allegiance.  
Yes, people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, kingship is not dead in this world of ours.

Listen to the words of one of the articles of the Saudi constitution:  
*Citizens are to pay allegiance to the King in accordance with the holy Koran and the  
tradition of the Prophet, in submission and obedience, in times of ease and difficulty,  
fortune and adversity.*

“In times of ease and difficulty, fortune and adversity”...  
Might as well have said, “for better or for worse, in sickness and in health”...  
Sounds almost like a wedding vow, promising faithfulness to the King.  
There is a royal marriage between the king and the king’s commoner subjects,  
who have no say in what kind of kingship will rule them.

We who live in a country cast in the mold of overthrowing kingship  
tend to react strongly to the threat of such absolute rule,  
pledging our allegiance instead... to a way of life we call freedom  
pledging our allegiance to the individual’s right...  
to be subject... to none.

Christ the King Sunday just may be the time to challenge this “all-American” ideal  
of being subject to none...  
and to consider how it affects our lives and infects our lived-out faith.

To be subject to none... it sounds so liberating...  
like the “Live Free or Die” motto of New Hampshireites  
(who either loved it or hated it)  
or like the self-absorbed anti-hero we see in so many movies,  
the one who rejects the limitations of commitment  
in favor of fun, footloose and duty-free.  
But we know eventually those footloose characters will find  
that they are not at all subject to no one;  
that they are subject to themselves,  
slaves of their own desires.

And they do not even begin to wake up to their enslavement

until they hit rock bottom –  
and until, at last, they are rescued by some persistent lover,  
who gives up everything to win them over  
who courageously invites their beloved into the realm of self-giving love,  
where a truer liberation lies.

Anyone have a favorite movie or book that fits this pattern?  
(Groundhog Day, Ghosts of Girlfriends Past, Dickens' Chr. Carol...)

Many are the dramas which feature such engaging redemption  
the redemption of the self-obsessed person who is ushered into a brand new reality,  
the place where love transforms and life has a new warmth and sparkle,  
the place where people give deeply of themselves  
and find they receive even more than they've bargained for.

And then the movie comes to a close, in that feel-good place,  
where love has conquered all in the end.

In real relationships, of course, it's just the beginning.  
In real relationships — whether we're talking about life-long-partnerships  
or friendships or family ties or working relationships —  
that *deeply self-giving connection* where people form authentic,  
life-changing relationships, and *commit* to making them work...  
is not the end point, but only the beginning,  
the beginning of a sometimes rewarding, sometimes rocky,  
sometimes downright painful way of living.

The imagery I'm playing with here, then, is of *being wedded*,  
of being committed to the other, so committed, so faithful,  
that you know you'd endure suffering for the other  
just as surely as you expect moments of joyful abandon,  
and maybe even moments of eye-opening, transforming redemption...  
wedded to each other in community...  
wedded to a value that goes far beyond being subject to none...

Let's consider then, this royal wedding that we are invited to  
on this Christ the King Sunday.

In what way, do you think, are we wedded to Christ?

Are we wedded to Christ our King... like Kate will soon be wedded to Prince William,

the commoner changed into royalty, into someone special and powerful?  
I think that's how some experience Christianity...

as a way of being lifted up to specialness and powerfulness,  
an assurance that our lives  
will go as we've planned because God our king fancies us.

Or... Are we wedded to Christ like the Saudi people are wedded to their king,  
committed to obedience without protest,

in exchange for law and order and other privileges of citizenship?  
I think this is how some people see Christ as their king...  
as a way of being safe, of knowing that as long as I follow the rules  
and don't make waves  
then I can live my life as I want to.

Or are we wedded to Christ the persistent lover, who pursues the beloved,  
endures the pain of rejection,

gives up everything... that we might be transformed  
and ushered into a new reality of self-giving love...?  
(who takes us just the way we are, turned-in-on-ourselves)

If we are to own this imagery and wed ourselves to this persistent-lover King,  
consciously rejecting all ideas of kingship

that take us where Christ would not have us go...  
then we need to go with our persistent lover to the cross  
where our fears of commitment are put to death  
and seeds of trust can be sown.

Just imagine that criminal on the cross next to Jesus.

Tradition has named him Dysmas,  
but we know nothing about the way he lived his life.

We know only when he hit rock bottom,  
he was able to see that God had joined him there.

When his trust in himself and his own power had completely run out,  
he could see there beside him a new kind of power,

one suffering with him and for him,  
one whom he could trust enough to say something like,  
"Jesus, I don't know where you are going, but I want to go with you.  
Remember me, would you, when you come into your kingdom."

I had the immense privilege, some years ago, to worship with a group of Christ followers

who named their congregation after this person of faith on the cross next to Jesus.  
The Community of St. Dysmas was the name of this ELCA congregation,  
and they worshiped inside the walls of the Maryland State Prison.

It was indeed an immense privilege to hang with these criminals  
who seemed to know Jesus in a way that I did not,  
who poured out tears and their prayers of personal confession so freely  
and told their stories spontaneously of how God's forgiveness  
had turned their lives upside down and given them tangible hope.

I had come to their worshiping community to be part of their hope  
to give up my precious time and suffer the indignities of being searched  
and being enclosed in scary walls, and being with scary people,  
to be Christ in their midst... for them... and I was, to be sure.  
They poured out their appreciation and exactly what it meant  
for them to have contact with Christians on the outside...

But what I didn't expect was to be ushered into a different reality,  
a community of faith so rich in Spirit and that it took my breath away,  
a group of people so honest about where their self-centeredness had taken them  
and where it was that God was taking them now.

The Community of St. Dysmas might be a fitting name for us  
this day of celebrating Christ the King...  
a community of those transformed by persistent lover Christ  
royally wedded to so different a King.

And we are ushered into paradise, into the kingdom of God this wedding feast, feeds us .  
who ushers us into the paradise of the redeemed

As we continue to rejoice in the power of God, singing our royal praises  
and sense where God is leading us

*Lift us up, Lord Christ.*

*Lift us up to your cross.*

*Draw us to yourself... and into the heart of God*

*that we might find our paradise*

*in you, and*

*in giving ourselves to the world you so love.*

*In your holy name we pray... amen.*