

Next spring, Charles will officially be crowned king of England. It's rumored that the coronation will be a slimmed down affair. Fewer people invited. The ceremony will be shorter and more frugal to fit the changing times, they say. But still, we know royalty will be on display. From gilded carriages, to polished footmen and uniformed guards, dignitaries and nobility in full regalia, all the glittering crowns and orbs and symbols of state. After all, this is supposed to be for a king.

I encountered a king once. When I was at St. Olaf College, the king and queen of Norway came to visit. Why Norway? Well, St. Olaf is a very Norwegian school. It has loads of Norwegian sweaters, an annual Norwegian Christmas dinner, a big cross country ski team, and a fight song with the words, Um Yah Yah in the chorus. It was a big deal when the king of Norway came. The school prepared for months, washing windows, planting flowers, putting together music programs and artwork. I got to see the king and queen. They weren't wear robes and crowns, to my disappointment, just business suits. Only thing that

indicated who they were was the buzzing crowd around them and the royal treatment they received.

Royalty get special treatment. They aren't like others. People bow and curtsy to them. They open doors for them and roll out red carpets for them. People are on their best behavior for them. After all, kings are kings. What they say, goes. What they want, happens. Nowadays, their power is shared with parliaments and boards and elected officials. But people still treat them with honor and respect.

In the church, today, we celebrate Christ the King Sunday. We remember that Jesus is King. Even over every earthly king. In him, all things were made, and everything holds together. What Jesus says, goes. What he wills, will happen. In the end, Jesus will have the final say.

True, there are other powers in the world, but Jesus has the true power.

In our reading from Colossians, the apostle Paul says creation belongs to him. All thrones and dominions and principalities. All emperors and dictators, Jesus is in charge of them, and his rule will overrule them and their cruelty and violence. Those who cause war and famine and pollution. Those who enrich themselves and ignore overcrowded prisons

and overcrowded schools and overcrowded shelters. Their power to cause suffering, fear and despair, seems greater than his. And where is our king Jesus and his authority over all?

There are all kinds of people that want to be King. The same was true in Jesus' time. There was Caesar and his empire. There were Roman governors and puppet kings and Jewish high priests and religious leaders. All of them trying to be boss. All trying to have the final say. Jesus saw them fighting for power and shook his head. All this energy wasted, when God was in charge. And God's purpose in the world was to proclaim release to captive and freedom for the oppressed. God's love and justice and forgiveness were going to be established in the world, Jesus was sure of it. But people didn't want to give up their power and authority. They didn't want to follow Jesus. He was getting in their way. So they had him arrested. They convicted him of defying their authority and breaking their laws. They sentenced him to death in the most humiliating way. To prove that he was powerless. That he could do nothing to stop them or stand in their way. To show everyone that he was a fake king, a false messiah. They nailed him to a cross in front of

the world, at the gates of the city to show everyone that you shouldn't mess with them.

No king would be found here. No king would end up here, except a failed king, a defeated king. And we don't want that kind of king. We want a strong king, a powerful king. A king who is ahead of others and above others and before others. A king who brings us along with him to the top of the heap. We admit it. We have a bit of Julius Caesar in us, a bit of King Herod. We want an earthly kingdom, an empire of our own. We, as the church, chase power and influence. We seek to conquer new territory and accumulate more spoils. We too get caught in pursuing our own sovereignty. But that was never what Jesus did, and it was never what he taught. In the gospel of Luke, the devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if he would bow down and worship him. But Jesus knows that God's kingdom is not about power over others. It's not about dominance; it's about surrender. It's about the greatest being the least. And the last being first.

God's kingdom is not like the kingdoms of this world. And Jesus is an entirely different King. He doesn't show us how to dominate. Or

overthrow the world and wrestle it to the ground. Or assert our superiority. Jesus has power and he uses it to heal the sick and broken. He has authority but he uses it to cast out demons and calm raging seas. He has honor, but he gives it to us to become children of God.

But Jesus is a different kind of King. And we know that because of where we find him. Not in a fancy palace or an exclusive resort. We find him in marginalized places, empty places, poor places. Today, he is in a terrible place, the most horrible place a human can be; in the Place of the Skull, nailed to a cross. This is a place of punishment, of convicts, and reprobates and sinners. sentenced to a humiliating death. This is our king, and the whole world knows it. A sign attached to his cross tells everyone: This is the King of the Jews. This is his throne, and this is his kingdom.

This is not the place a king should be. And these are not the kind of people he should have around him. That's another reason we know Jesus is different. He should be surrounded by admirers. He should have honor and glory and a whole court of people attending him and serving him. He should have people offering him cushions and warm drinks. Instead,

people take his clothes and offer him sour wine. He is not praised or cheered, but mocked and ridiculed. They say, “He saved others, but he can’t save himself. If he is God’s Messiah,” say the religious folks, “if he is God’s chosen, let him prove it.” The soldiers of Rome laugh and scorn him too: “Save yourself,” they say. “If you are a King, bring out your armies.” Even the criminals next to him offer him insults: “Save yourself,” one says. “And save us too.”

There is no respect here. No royal treatment. No bowing or curtsying or obedient attendance. No one cares about Jesus. No one comforts him. He is at the mercy of the world, and he should save himself. And then he should save us too. He should show everyone how great and strong he is. He should defeat his enemies and put them in their places. But our king, our Jesus says nothing. He endures the insults and ridicule. He is humbled even unto death. Alone in his faith that this is what has Father has asked of him. That God’s kingdom is a kingdom not of this world. It will not be attractive or popular. It will not be admired or adored. It will be disregarded and dismissed. Our Jesus does not rule from a throne, but from a cross of shame and defeat.

This is our King. That's what the sign above him says. This is the king of the Jews, here for all the world to see. And our challenge, and our comfort is to live as if this were true. Our challenge is to remember that we will not find him in the high places, but the low places. Not just in the beautiful places, but the godforsaken places. In the places where there is no dignity. In the soup kitchens. In the juvenile detention centers. With those discarded on the trash heap of life. Remember, he is revealed as our king in the Place of the Skull on a cross. And how we treat the least of these is how we treat our king. The poverty and lowliness of Jesus is what inspired St. Francis of Assisi. This 12th century monk believed that as Christ emptied himself, he should empty himself too. He lived his life with lepers and outcasts, renouncing all worldly pleasures. It is a challenge to believe this is where we find our king, but it is also a comfort. It is a comfort to know that when we are in our lowest places of suffering, he is there. When we are poor and humbled and close to death, we are not alone.

Our king is in the low places. He is not praised and admired. He is with the scorned and scoffed at. And our challenge, our comfort is to live as if

this is true too. Our gatherings are not just for the good and respectable. We do not chase after the famous and influential and those beloved by the crowd. At the cross of Jesus, there is no one who praises him. There is no one who respects him or bows down to him. He was treated with disdain and cruelty. And it is a challenge to see him treated that way. It is a challenge to know Jesus was condemned by popular opinion. That people mocked his devotion to mercy and his devotion to God's kingdom. That he would not take a shortcut to power. But put everything in God's hands. It is a challenge to us, but it is also a comfort to know that the one despised and rejected is not despised and rejected by God. And these words about Jesus are not the last words about him. God has the last word. And it is resurrection. It is a comfort that when the world mocks us or ridicules us for believing in love and forgiveness, we know that the last word will come from God. No matter what anyone else says. Our king is the King of the Jews as it says on his cross. He is our King. He is the king of heaven and earth. And he does not serve himself, he serves us. He does not save himself, he saves us. He does not stay high above us and the despair of the world, but descends to the very bottom,

to bring us to the very top with him. He does not despise us or reject us or forget us. He loves us and remembers us when he comes into his kingdom.