

**The Feast of Christ the King
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J.A. Loftus, S.J.

The celebration of Christ the King is a challenging celebration for many in today's church. The image of the King and his Kingdom offends some contemporary sensibilities—especially in democratized parts of the world, and for at least half of the human population: many women find the image particularly disturbing. To some, the image seems too militaristic, too triumphal, too un-democratic, hierarchical and certainly too patriarchal.

If that were not enough, few of us in North America actually have had much personal experience with kings. And many of us can say honestly that we are happier for not having had much personal experience with kings, or queens, or any royalty for that matter!

So many of us do not know quite what to do with the powerful image of today's celebration. We can pretend to ignore it. But that is hard to do especially in a community inspired and named for St. Ignatius. It was a pivotal image for him. The image also presides over every celebration of ours from the back of the church. On your way out glance upward and see Christ the King hovering over us all. We can try to neutralize it a bit by talking of more gentle "reign" of God. But, finally, that doesn't help me much either.

So what to do? Part of the problem, I suggest, may stem from a dogged insistence on taking things literally. Today is not a day for the literal-minded. People can get too comfortable with the image of a literal king: another great man in power, lording it over his kingdom, marching off to fight another day for his God—and always winning the fierce battle. As I mentioned, even St. Ignatius, 16th century soldier that he was, became captivated by the image of an earthly king in one of his pivotal meditations in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

Or, perhaps, worse, we just can't bring ourselves to really listen and take-in the rather astounding and sometimes scandalous image that our very own scriptures provide. The king presented in today's liturgy is nothing like what we've read about or heard kings are supposed to be like.

The king Christians celebrate today seems, on the one hand, so much less than a real king. Think of the image of today's gospel. From an execution's bloody remains is fashioned a throne from which this king speaks a word of pardon, and promises to remember a petty thief. And it says right there on the sign: this is the King of the Jews. And his throne is a cross. He seems so much *less* than a real king. It is a stretch for the literal-minded throughout history who would fashion a different kind of throne for him, and try to follow him trailing off into the sunset in bellicose triumph over the evil

world. The King in today's gospel is so much less than that.

And, on the other hand, if we listen to St. Paul this morning, this King seems so much *more* than any real king humanity has ever known. David and Saul, Solomon and all the kings of human history pale in comparison. This king, Christ, "is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation, the one in whom all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible—all things have been created through him and for him." This, too, is a stretch for the literal-minded who would try to make him smaller and more manageably human—perhaps the "historical Jesus of Nazareth as king." No, this king, for St. Paul at least, is the Lord of all that lives and has breath.

This is the image of a cosmic King who presides over the "big bang" of the universe and who is the pinnacle of the spiral towards which all creation and all energy hurtles. This king is so much more than any real king ever was or will be.

It is important that we try to get this image right for ourselves. In recent years, most of us have become painfully aware of just how powerful idealized religious images can be. The rhetoric of a certain kind of fundamentalist interpretation of Islam has riveted our world. And not just intellectually, but it has violently exploded parts of it. Images are powerful

and can be dangerous. And for Christians, none has been more powerful or dangerous than the image of Christ the King. Just remember the hordes of Crusaders marching against the Muslim world just a few hundred years ago.

We are left in today's readings with contrasting images of a less than real, and more than real, king. Do they come together?

I think they do come together in a strangely beautiful way. This passage from St. Paul was a favorite for the amazing poet, palaeontologist, and theologian, Teilhard de Chardin. He wrote once of this king: "After we have harnessed the energies of the tides, the sun and the moon, and gravitation itself, we will harness for the King the energies of love. And on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, we will have discovered fire." He got it right! This kingdom can only be one of compassion and love.

This king was born in a stable, dies on his throne, and yet guides all creation with a universal energy of acceptance, compassion, and love—much like a little child might. A strange King indeed! Not really much of a threat to democratic ideals, inclusive politics, or even gender-neutrality.

There is a paradox at the heart of what we celebrate today. It is not just the image of the king; it's not just the paucity of our own North American experience with royalty; it is not just the militarism or the un-

democratic style of the picture. The paradox remains at the heart of the imaginative construct itself.

The only reconciliation creation will ever know, is purchased on an instrument of cruel violence, by a true but strange King. There is the mystery, there is the scandal, that will not go away. And there, too, is the danger. The Lord of all creation lords it over no one. For this strange king, it is *all* about love; it is *all* about compassion. It is *all* about us.

J.A. Loftus, S.J.