

# Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, Year C

Fr. Samuel Springuel

20 November, 2022

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading** 2 Samuel 5:1–3

**Responsorial Psalm** Psalm 122:1–2,3–4,4–5

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading** Colossians 1:12–20

**Gospel** Luke 23:35–43

Today is the feast of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, but what is a king? As 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans, this is a non-trivial question. Living in a democratic republic, we have no immediate experience of kings. Indeed, we fought a revolution against the English king to throw off his government almost 250 years ago. So if we're really going to understand what a king is, we need to look outside our immediate experience for inspiration.

So what about that English king? Or at least his contemporary successor. There has been much in the news relatively recently about the fact that they've got a new king over there, but the thing that has struck me is how empty the position is. It's all pomp and no substance: a ceremonial head of state with absolutely no power. Indeed one of the worries of some of the pundits seems to be that Charles will have too much substance. That he will continue to advocate for the positions he advocated for as Prince and thereby become divisive and a point of contention. Instead, he's supposed to follow the example of his mother: so impartial and inscrutable that none of his subjects could possibly find offense in what he does or says. Is this really what it means to be king?

Historically, kings were very different from what England has today. So perhaps we should look back in history to figure out what a king is. Louis XIV of France, the Sun King, was very different from what England has now. He was an absolute monarch: a king who has all the powers of the state at his disposal. Indeed, he so epitomized this concept that he is credited with saying, "L'état, c'est moi." (The state, that's me.) He was the supreme lawmaker, enforcer, judge, jury, and executioner of France. Early on, under his authority, France began to prosper as he reformed corrupt practices and made the government more efficient. However, with no check on his authority, Louis eventually made mistakes, particularly in foreign policy, and ended up fighting against a nearly united Europe in the latter days of his reign. While he did not lose that war, it certainly cannot be said that he won it either as French power was effectively checked by the other European powers, though not diminished. So perhaps we should look for a king who was more successful abroad.

While not always using the title "king," history is replete with conquerors whose foreign policy whims were unchecked in their lifetime: Alexander the

Great, Caesar, Charlemagne, among others. Men like these conquered neighbors, defeated enemies, and created empires. They were triumphant on the battlefield in their lifetime, but such did not translate into a durable monarchy. Both Alexander the Great's and Charlemagne's empires were divided up immediately upon their death, split into squabbling factions. Rome certainly outlasted Caesar, but his route to power created such resentment within that it led to 10 to 20 years of multiple civil wars (the number and length depends on how you count them). During the course of these he was assassinated, and it took years before Octavius emerged victorious and created a stable rule.

Perhaps then, history is not the best guide for what a king is, or more accurately what he is supposed to be. For that we might be better off looking at the stories we tell about kings; stories where ideals can live untarnished by reality.

Perhaps the most famous king of legend, in the English speaking world at least, is Arthur Pendragon, King of England. This fabled king was a man of destiny. Raised outside of the royal court and without knowledge of his heritage. He returned after the death of his father, Uther Pendragon, ending a dispute over the succession that threatened to drive England into civil war by pulling the famed Sword in the Stone to prove his worthiness to reign over England. As ruler, he created the Round Table, a government of knights founded on the principles of Chivalry: the defense of the weak and powerless by the strong. So enlightened was his rule, the story goes, that even though he eventually fell due to familial disputes, Arthur was taken out of time to be preserved until the once and future king was needed again in England's hour of direst need.

Or perhaps we should look at more recent storytelling and examine the kings of Disney. After all, those princesses all had to have fathers who were kings if they are properly to be called "princess." In examining these stories, however, there isn't much in them to recommend the kings. The best of them have barely any screen time, just enough to establish what the princess's home life was like before the evil such-and-such started mucking things up and maybe a bit at the end to show everything is back to normal. Think of the kings in Snow White or Sleeping Beauty. On the other hand, many of them are themselves the cause of the problems the princess must face, not out of malice, but out of some sense of duty that requires them to force their daughter into something she clearly doesn't want. Think the Sultan in Aladdin or King Triton in the Little Mermaid.

So given all this, what is a king? Perhaps that's the wrong question. Perhaps we should be asking, "What do we mean when we call Jesus a king?" Surely we don't mean that he is like any of the kings I've described. Jesus himself, in his most direct comment about his kingship, said, "My kingdom is not of this world." And when Pilate followed this up by asking, "So you are a king?" Jesus would only reply, "You say that I am a king." Jesus never claimed the title of king directly. And yet, Pilate did proclaim him king to all the world with an inscription on the cross which read, "Jesus the Nazorean, the King of the Jews," in Hebrew (the language of the local people), Latin (the official language of governance), and Greek (the lingua franca of trade and commerce in the eastern portion of the Empire). A king whose kingdom is not of this world. A king whose crown is made of thorns and whose throne is the cross of his execution. This is the kind of king that Jesus is.

Now, I'll grant you that there are echos of our earthly ideas of a king in Jesus. His entry into Jerusalem with the crowds shouting "Hosana!", laying out

there cloaks for him to ride over, this calls to mind the pomp and pageantry of the ceremonies in which Charles was proclaimed King of England recently. Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, talks about how we have been transferred to Christ's kingdom, language which echos the practice of ancient conquerers when they transferred the people they conquered from the conquered territory to the king's own home territory where their presence would be a visible reminder of the king's conquest. Jesus was the king foretold and forever, with the angel declaring to Mary that, "the Lord God will give him the throne of his father, David [...] and of his kingdom there shall be no end." And in his teaching, Jesus challenges us, his followers, to create a better world in which the strong serve the weak, saying, "Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me."

These echos, however, while they allow us to see some of our earthly ideas of a king in Jesus, should not obviate the need to recognize that Jesus is a different kind of king. Further, we need to go beyond asking, "What do we mean when we call Jesus a king?" Jesus's message was a direct challenge to us. "Come follow me!" "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life!" The real question we have to answer: "Is Christ *our* king?"