

A REFLECTION ON TODAY'S FEAST

Donal Dorr

Christ the KING

In 1925 Pope Pius XI established the major feast of Christ the King. In 1969 Pope Paul VI expanded the name of the feast to 'Christ the King of the Universe' and moved the celebration of the feast to the last Sunday before the season of Advent.

The 1920s and 1930s were years when there was a major political movement in many countries of the world – a growing cult of 'the Great Leader'. In Germany, Hitler led the racist and oppressive Nazis into power; in Italy, the fascists, led by Mussolini took power; in Spain, General Franco won the civil war; and in several Latin American countries there were similar despotic governments. In Britain there was the emergence of a strong fascist movement, but they did not succeed in taking over the government. In Ireland it was 'the Blueshirts' who wanted to become the dominant political force.

In the face of this cult of 'the Leader' (Il Duce, der Führer), it was understandable that the Pope and other Church authorities at that time wanted to stress the point that, for Christians, only Jesus Christ should be seen as the one who has supreme authority. So it made sense for them to establish the feast of Christ the King and to insist on its importance.

THE POWER AND LEADERSHIP OF JESUS

When we Christians speak of the Kingship of Jesus, we have to insist that the kind of power exercised by Jesus was the exact opposite of the kind of oppressive political power exercised by so many of the fascist or semi-fascist political leaders of the past or the present.



St Matthew's Gospel tells us that as soon as Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, he saw the Spirit of God descending on him and *a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."* (Mt 3:16-17)

From that moment on, Jesus was determined to share with others the kind of experience he had just had.

His whole ministry was devoted to helping people to see how much God loved them. So there could be no question of Jesus acting as the kind of leader who would dominate or oppress others. His form of leadership was one of empowering people, by healing them, encouraging them, loving them and showing them how lovable each one of them was.

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There is a lovely story in the Gospel which tells how the mother of James and John caused jealousy among the twelve apostles by begging Jesus to give her two sons top places in his coming Kingdom. Having gently refused the request, Jesus went on to make a sharp contrast between the dominating power of secular rulers and the kind of authority he expected his followers to exercise: *'Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.'* He then told them that he himself *'did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'* (Mt 20:20-28). The Epistle to the Philippians reminds us that Jesus *'emptied himself ... and became obedient unto death, even death on a Cross'* (Phil 2:7-6). No wonder, then, that the well-known hymn *Hail Redeemer* calls Jesus the 'King of love on Calvary'.



The enthroned Christ with four vanguard angels. This beautiful mosaic is from the basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy, and it dates back to the sixth century. (Photo: L. Lew OP)

St John's Gospel tells us how, at the Last Supper, Jesus himself gave a very practical example of the kind of servant leadership he wanted his followers to practice. Despite the protest of Peter, Jesus insisted on completing the menial task of washing the feet of each of the apostles (Jn 13:4-8).

The leadership role of Jesus refers not just to what he did during his life on earth. The scriptures also tell us that Jesus is the *first fruits* (1 Cor 15:20) of our future renewed universe and that *'when the times reach their completion, all things in the heavens and on earth will be brought into unity under Christ'* (Eph 1:10). So he will bring fulfilment not only to humanity but also to the whole of creation.

QUESTIONING

In the light of the huge differences between what Jesus teaches us about leadership and the kind of dominating leadership practiced by the kings in the past, some people have questions about whether we should still use the title of 'king' for Jesus. Furthermore, since almost all kings nowadays (with the exception of the kings of Thailand and Eswatini – formerly Swaziland) have little or no real power, some would argue that it does not mean much to modern people to call Jesus a king.

There is another difficulty about applying the word 'king' to Jesus. Quite a lot of women, and some men, feel that we Christians should avoid using any terms that seem patriarchal or sexist, referring to women in ways that do not respect the full equality of the sexes. So they want us to replace the phrase 'the Kingdom of God' with the more neutral words 'the Reign of God'. Some years ago, a good friend of mine told me that she likes to use the term 'the *kindom* of God' rather than 'the Kingdom of God'. When any of us uses this newly coined term 'kindom' it reminds us that Jesus sees all of us as one big family centred on himself.

LIVE AND LET LIVE

My guess is that most of the readers of this magazine have no hesitation in calling Jesus the King of the Universe. But it will promote unity in our Church if we all recognize and tolerate the reservations of those who feel uneasy with the term. On the other hand, those who question the use of the term 'Christ the King' must not try to force others to share their views. We live in 'a broad Church' where there is room for all – and we don't need to quarrel about how we express our faith in Jesus our Saviour and our friend. ■

Fr Donal Dorr is a theologian, a writer and a priest of St Patrick's Missionary Society and lives in Dublin, Ireland. Donal's book, *A Creed for Today* is published by Veritas in Ireland and Orbis Books in the USA.