

STRANGE KING

*Last Sunday after Pentecost: Christ the King (Proper 29C)
November 22, 2022 — Richard L. Ullman*

Well, this is embarrassing. On the Church's calendar across the world, today is the Sunday of Christ the King—a much more direct, in-your-face name than the progressively correct wording on the face of our service leaflet.

Christ the King! Especially embarrassing to us in this land where we are not royalists.

No kings and queens for us. No Ma'am! No Sir! We are all little 'r' republicans, pledging allegiance to the "flag if the United States of America and to the *republic* for which it stands".

No kings and queens for us. We are all little "d" democrats, committed to the proposition that "government *of* the people, *by* the people, *for* the people shall not perish from the earth".

This Christ the King thing is very, very embarrassing, indeed!

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Yet, 'twas ever so. In the Gospel portion just proclaimed we come upon a scene of execution. We hear a gathered crowd jeering. We overhear a conversation among convicted, dying criminals. One of them joins in the jeers. The other recognizes strange royalty upon the cross:

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

With the grace of a reigning king, Jesus responds:

Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.

Strange King, this, whose reign encompasses and overcomes death.

Strange Kingdom, too, which harbors no weapons of destruction or deterrence, but is, rather, a gracious and fruitful garden — Paradise.

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Because Christ the King is so disarming, so embarrassing, so strange, today's sermon continues in an unaccustomed way. For I believe we might apprehend our Strange King more fully if I talk less and we invite him into our souls in perhaps richer ways.

Let's start with that prayer Jesus our King, taught us., where we first pray...

God's kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.

And we conclude saying...

For the kingdom, the power, the glory are yours.

Please take a Hymnal, turn to #613. Listen to the music, especially how the very first phrase starts high as in heaven, then descends to where we are, here on earth.

< PAUSE to hear the line played on a solo stop >

Now let's pray for Kingdom come, singing the first stanza.

*Thy kingdom come O God!
Thy rule, O Christ, begin!
Break with thine iron rod
the tyranny of sin!*

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Our King comes not with flashing sword as in days of yore, nor with tanks and drones and artillery shells as – sadly beyond words – in our own day. Our King comes with the dawning beauty of sunrise. It's important, I believe, to take the beauty of our Strange King's coming into our hearts. Please turn to Hymn #73, where that beauty is expressed in a simple, lovely way in melody and words. Listen while Charles plays the clear, simple music of this song.

< PAUSE: play-through on flute or clarinet stop >

Now let's proclaim the beauty of our King's arrival singing the first stanza:

*The King shall come when morning dawns
and light triumphant breaks;
when beauty gilds the eastern hills
and light to joy awakes.*

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Yes, beauty surrounds our King. Yet this morning's Gospel portion does not spare the horror of pain, mockery, and despising that accompanies the beauty of our Strange King. We need to take all that into our hearts as well. One hymn especially helps me with this: #458. Please turn to it.

Listen to the music, which I find as haunting as the irony of the mingled pain and beauty of the cross.

< PAUSE to hear organ play-through >

Stanza 3, it seems to me, especially captures the deep mystery of Christ the King: how I both welcome and reject him. Please sing stanza 3 with me:

*Sometimes they strew his way,
and his strong praises sing
resounding all the day
hosannas to their King.
Then "Crucify!" is all their breath,
and for his death they thirst and cry.*

Yet the last word is not death. As the cross I wear proclaims, the one we kill reigns. Our betrayal and sadness turn to joy, which is the fullness of the Sunday of Christ the King. Take that joy into your hearts and minds and souls, and sing the final stanza of hymn 458, stanza 7:

*Here might I stay and sing,
no story so divine:
never was love, dear King,
never was grief like thine.
This is my friend, in whose sweet praise
I all my days could gladly spend.*

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Let us pray.

Christ our King:

Let your strange, self-giving beauty
enter our hearts,
fill our minds, and
rule our lives.

May God's kingdom come on earth—here, now—
ruling every person, every party,
every tribe, every nation.
Amen.

Blessing for the Feast of Christ the King

May you be made strong
with all the strength that comes from God,
who has rescued us
and bought us into the kingdom of his beloved Son; (*Colossians 1:11, 13*)

And the blessing of the Great King, our Lord Jesus Christ,
and of the Father, whose Anointed One he is,
and of the Holy Spirit, who royally empowers you,
be among you and remain with you
this Sunday of Christ the King,
and for ever *more*.
Amen.