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Christ the King
Trinity Aurora

As Americans, we tend to have a love/hate relationship with the whole concept of monarchy. Most of us probably would never accept a king or queen as head of this country, but we are infatuated with royals, especially British ones. Our understanding of royalty, however, often seems idealized or romanticized, as we find in movies like *The King and I* or one of my favorites, *The Princess Bride*.

Royalty was a much more serious matter when John was writing his gospel around the turn of the second century. Monarchs generally held absolute power, including that of life or death over their subjects. People expected their kings and queens to amass and display tremendous wealth as a sign of their greatness. In exchange, the monarch would protect his or her subjects from enemies, provide a stable government, and create systems and structures that allowed the kingdom to function.

This is what the Jews of the first century wanted and expected in their ruler. They had been waiting many years for a Messiah—a person anointed by God—to defeat the Roman occupiers and to restore the kingdom of Israel. They were looking for a king like David, the soldier who defeated Goliath and united the tribes of Israel. Instead, they got Jesus.

Today is the Feast of Christ the King—the day when many Christians celebrate Christ's dominion. But the setting for today's lesson—the one that we just heard from John's gospel—is hardly fitting for a king. Jesus is standing at his trial before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. He is on the way to his crucifixion and death. This is not what we expect in a king.

But Jesus is not that kind of monarch. He says to Pilate, "My kingship is not of this world." In God's kingdom, our understanding of royalty is turned upside down. God's power isn't used to conquer soldiers and kingdoms, but to defeat sin and death. Wealth isn't measured by money, but by an abundance of love. Greatness doesn't come to those who rule, but to those who serve.

Jesus knows that his kingdom is not like any other. To be in God's kingdom, we must love as God does—unconditionally, and in a state of radical openness to the world around us. It requires emotional and spiritual vulnerability—the willing to feel the intensity and even pain that are unavoidable when we connect with each other at the deepest, most meaningful levels.

This uncompromising openness is something many of us, in my experience, work very hard to avoid. We seek protection—perhaps not intentionally—from emotional, physical, and even spiritual pain by insulating ourselves from much of God's creation. We isolate ourselves from those who are less fortunate than we through intolerance, prejudice, and indifference. We separate from one another with fences, laws, and the expectations of a culture driven largely by the economics of materialism. That's not the kingdom where Christ is king.

Those protective mechanisms that shield us also limit us—they keep us from experiencing fully all of life's emotions, including love, joy, happiness, and sorrow. But when we drop those barriers, as we open our hearts to the world around us, with all its messiness and

complexities, our lives become richer and fuller. We experience our humanity at the deepest, most profound levels. That is when we are closest to God, and it is where God wants us to be.

But it isn't easy. Accepting Christ as king can be challenging at the best of times, but especially so when we are threatened by financial pressures, by fears about employment, or housing, or health care. It's tough right now for many people, probably some of us.

In difficult times we often withdraw, turn inward, and become even more protective of what we have. These are human reactions, but that does not make them healthy or even Christian ones. We should not let fear drive our decisions. It is precisely when times are difficult that we most need to be open and welcoming.

The church, as imperfect as it is, is among the ways we advance the kingdom of God on earth—promoting Christ's values, not ours. It is here—through worship, prayer, and our gifts of substance and service—that we grow in our relationship with God and each other. The mission and ministries of the church help us open ourselves to the needs of the world around us.

It is appropriate that today we will consecrate your pledges to support the work of this parish. Our gifts to the church, whether time or money or both, are expression of our love of God, our gratitude for what God has given us, and our commitment to follow Christ. As Christians, the work of the kingdom is ours to do.

Someone once said to me that the easiest thing the church asks us to do is give money. To those who've been battered by the economy, this might sound insensitive. But in comparison with the other ways we sustain our Christian community, it may very well be true. Loving God above all others, respecting the dignity of every human being—those are hard. Embracing the hope, compassion, and forgiveness that Christ embodies—and then living in ways that express that—these are far more difficult than writing a check or dropping cash in the plate each week.

It is by demonstrating our love for others that we turn towards God—when we offer love without conditions, when we share what we have without the need to be repaid, when we show hospitality to people who are alone or in a strange land—and that's when we discover the depth and immensity of God's grace.

This is a remarkable parish. You have ministered to this community for 160 years. You have many through many changes, thorough ups and downs, and in the recent few years you have accomplished a great deal.

And you are a generous people. You have given generously of yourselves in many ways, and for all your gifts to the church I thank you, and on behalf of Bishop Lee send his thanks as well.

If you are pledging now, thank you for that as well, and if you are not, please consider doing so. You will find that it gives you great joy. A psychological study published last year showed that people who gave money to others were happier than those who spent money on themselves. The researchers were surprised, but their results affirmed something I've know for years—that giving to others brings great joy.

When we open ourselves joyously to others, when we feel the joy of loving and living and giving generously—that's when Christ is King.