

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

In America, we have a love-hate relationship with royalty. We boast in our casting off of the tyranny of King George and balk at even a hint that someone might rule over us as a king. Ours is a government “of the people, by the people, for the people,” President Lincoln famously wrote in the Gettysburg Address. With echoes of the rejection of another King, one can almost hear us say: “*We have no king*” period (John 19:15). And yet, we have more than a passing interest in the royals — consider the recent coverage of the death and funeral of Britain’s Queen Elizabeth. And you know I watched much of the pomp of that royal funeral.

Back in the early 60s, President Kennedy fashioned his administration as the mythical Camelot with himself as the noble King Arthur. The country seemed to have bought into the narrative. History shows that the country was largely united during his presidency — he has the highest approval rating of any president since WWII. And indeed, that’s what kings and queens provide — someone around which to unite — an icon. Yes, that’s what I observed Queen Elizabeth was. She wasn’t in charge of the government; she was an icon, and the country was united under her.

Americans don’t have that. We have a Declaration and Constitution, we have flags and seals, we have monuments and national holidays, but we have no living icon around which to unite. But Christians do. We have the icon of the invisible God, the beloved Son of the Father, around whom we unite: Jesus Christ, our Lord. And regardless the kind of earthly government Christians might have to endure while laboring here, we have been made citizens of a heavenly kingdom ruled by King Jesus.

The contrast between Him and earthly kings, real and imagined, is striking. Unlike earthly kings who ascend to the throne for a time, Jesus was born an eternal King. The angel Gabriel told His mother Mary, “*the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end*” (Luke 1:32-33). The circumstances of His birth were anything but regal — born in a stable, laid in a manger, flanked by animals and shepherds. He had to flee for His life to Egypt. Still the Magi found this child “*born king of the Jews*” (Matt. 2:2), and presented Him with royal gifts of “*gold and frankincense and myrrh*” (Matt. 2:11).

From the beginning of His ministry Jesus was recognized as the Christ, a King. Andrew confessed it: “*‘We have found the Messiah’ (which means Christ)*” (John 1:41). Nathanael confessed it right away: “*you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel*” (John 1:49); but Jesus didn’t act as earthly kings. This King didn’t live in luxury in a royal palace. He lived an itinerant life with no place to lay His head (Matt. 8:20). Unlike earthly kings with their many servants to serve

them, Jesus came as a servant king — coming “*not to be served but to serve*” (Matt. 20:28), preaching, feeding, healing, restoring life. And when, after one such service, some were planning to make Him king in an earthly way, Jesus withdrew (John 6:15). His reign would happen the way He and His Father had planned it, taking Him the way of the cross.

That’s what our redemption required; that’s how our forgiveness was won; King Jesus was betrayed, arrested, scourged, and led to the cross, sentenced to death because He was a King, though His kingship was no threat to Caesar’s earthly rule — His kingdom was not of this world (John 18:36). King Jesus was crowned with thorns and arrayed with a purple robe; He was given a reed as a scepter. All this was meant to ridicule His incredible claim of being the Christ, a King. The scoffers didn’t realize how right they were. Even when He was lifted up on the cross, it continued. The rulers sneered: “*He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!*” The soldiers mocked Him: “*If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!*” And then they put over his head a “*an inscription*” announcing “*This is the King of the Jews.*”

Our own crucifixes carry the same inscription, though we do it not in mockery. It is our confession: INRI — *Jesus Nazareus, Rex Iudaeorum*, which is Latin for Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. He is our King, who did His duty for us, serving His subjects unto death, that He might “[*deliver*] us from the domain of darkness and [*transfer*] us to [*His*] kingdom.”

How unkingly Jesus looked hanging there naked from the cross! What folly! But again that was God’s plan, choosing “*what is foolish in the world to shame the wise,*” choosing “*what is weak in the world to shame the strong,*” choosing “*what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are*” (1 Cor. 1:27-28). The Holy Trinity had planned it from before the world was even made — that He by whose Word all things were made “*in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible,*” that He who “*is before all things*” and who holds “*all things ... together,*” that He who is God from the beginning and became flesh, in whom dwells “*all the fullness of God,*” that He would go to a cross in weakness and shame and be lifted up to die ... to redeem us, to justify us, to reconcile us.

How scandalous to call this one King — that’s the way it looks to the casual observer — so much so that even one of the criminals that was being crucified with Jesus joined in the mockery! “*Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!*”

Jesus was the Christ, the King, but He couldn’t save Himself from the cross and save the world. Our salvation required sacrifice; our justification required innocent blood, a Lamb without blemish, the Lamb of God. And so, He offered up His own life unto death for the sake of the world.

But the story doesn't end there. Jesus would come into His kingdom, alive again. Raised from the dead on the third day, Jesus would ascend also back to the Father and take His place on the throne of God. There King Jesus reigns and rules as King of kings, *“far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come”* (Eph. 1:21).

That the other criminal, who was crucified with Jesus, could understand this and believe in Jesus as the Christ, the eternal King, is surely a work of God, the miracle of faith. Hanging there from the cross, he rebuked his fellow condemned, but then said to Jesus: *“remember me when you come into your kingdom,”* acknowledging Jesus' kingship, acknowledging Jesus' power to rise from death, acknowledging Jesus' authority to transfer him into His kingdom. He was right to do so, and Jesus delivered. *“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

This promise given to this man, who like us justly deserved not only temporal but eternal punishment, is given also to us sinners. When we die, our souls depart from the body and go to be with Jesus in paradise — we usually call it heaven — while our bodies are laid in the ground. In the midst of our sorrow at death, this truth gives us comfort. But Christian hope does not end there, for we know and confess that King Jesus will come again in glory on the Last Day, and He will raise you and “me and all the dead.” And with our bodies and souls reunited as created originally in Paradise, but resurrected, glorified bodies, He will give eternal life to you and “me and all believers in Christ” (Small Catechism, Third Article of the Apostles' Creed). To which we all say, “This is most certainly true.”

Therefore, let us continue to look to our King, to Jesus, the icon of our salvation, the icon of our faith. Let us continue to unite under His banner and the preaching of His cross. Let us continue to hope in His promise, that though we die, yet shall we live (John 11:25) — with Him at first in paradise, and in the resurrection in His kingdom which never ends. As Luther wrote in the concluding stanza of the beautiful funeral hymn, “Now Lay We Calmly in the Grave” — he wrote:

“So help us, Christ, our Hope in loss;
Thou hast redeemed us by Thy cross
From endless death and misery;
We praise, we bless, we worship Thee” (ELHB538:8).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.