

Solemnity Christ the King, 20 November 2021, Ben Frie SJ

Architecturally, it is an invention: you design a liturgical year with readings and prayers that begins with the mystery of the Incarnation of God, the Christian Roman feast of the invincible sun, our Christmas. You build it up by following Jesus in his earthly life, the temptations in the desert, his public appearances in the temple and synagogue, up to and including the fiasco of the cross, which turns out to be a victory. Then you let the church come into being and follow it in its trades and accidents and then you put a big frame around it that encompasses everything: Christ as King of the Universe. He started out simple, grew into a genius and became all-encompassing. A structure with the significance of the Jewish temple until its destruction in the year 70, or the Kaaba in Mecca or St Peter's in Rome. Grand, impressive, all-encompassing and overarching, of fundamental importance for the respective religions.

Does this triumphant image fit the prince of the kings of the earth? What does He say when He is called to account? "My kingdom is not of this world." "Yes, king am I, to bear witness to the truth." To which the skeptical Roman opposite him replies, "What is truth?" His philosophical training had taught him that concept. His philosophical training had taught him not to consider the concept. But completely unaware, he asked the question when the answer to his question was right in front of him in the person of Jesus. It is in this encounter that John sharpens his gospel: God and man, Jesus and Pilate meet and argue about the right to truth. In other words: who has the power in your life? What is the guiding, all-determining principle you follow? When you are faced with an important choice, what do you let yourself be guided by? Pilate is astonished.

In every organization there are calls for leaders, leaders who can guarantee that the organization functions well, that it acts ethically, that it fulfils its purpose. We like to look up to the great leaders of history. Kennedy, Mandela, Ghandi, and at the same time we like to be annoyed by leaders who do not live up to our expectations and leave important documents on the train.

What about all those great names in our newsreels? And when it comes to being king - after the formation, being king, or queen, is no longer so interesting. What is our image of kingship? What makes an eighteen-year-old suitable? But after Glasgow, we also ask the question: who is truthful when it comes to our climate? Who does what is right, what must be done?

Israel, and I mean the ancient biblical people, cried out for justice, truth and peace, just as we do. We need a king, they said, who will guarantee all that. No, said the priests, God is our king! For a long time there has been a theocracy in Israel, a state run by God and religious. Muslim fundamentalism also seems to call for such a thing. In our country, the echoes of this are unavoidable. Officially we still say: 'so help me God Almighty'. But how deep is it, and who still goes along with it?

In the history of the Jewish people, the image of the true king, the authentic sovereign who turns the fate of his people for the better, has grown from generation to generation. Many Jewish kings did not achieve much of this. David came closest to what the people imagine a king to be, so strong that the human errors of lust are forgiven. Then, after him, there was nothing for a long time, but people wrote and thought about it. In the psalms then comes the sketch of the true king with refrains in the literature about the end times, when everything will come to completion. The image was there, but it was not yet reality.

When the truth appeared, He was not recognized. People had grown their own images, again about power and wealth. That a king is a servant, has a service function and nothing more - that was no longer in the picture. When Jesus appeared and could not be ignored, it slowly got through to some. People like Pilate, who came face to face with Jesus, were impressed. Nicodemus, some of the apostles, Mary Magdalene - they saw the true form of the King and recognized Him in His sovereignty. They sensed the meaning of Jesus for themselves, but also His much greater significance. And they were shocked by this discovery. The truth is not of this world, he said, it comes from God, from him who gives his life for all. Yes, this Jesus is King, He who is and who was and who is to come. He is above time and rises high above the world with his testimony.

The question of course becomes: Can we recognize Him as our King? Do we still have that image of untouchable sovereignty, are we still available to Him, do we still want to be submissive? Could it be that He is calling us to be part of His kingdom? Can we follow Him in His ode to service, availability? The eternal King will soon appear to us in the shape of a child, a human child. He was given divine traits by his impressive performance in the midst of people. My Lord and my God, we still say.