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## The Once and Future King

John 18: 33-37

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 25, 2012 by Christy Lohr Sapp

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*Pilate asked him, “So you are a king?” Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king.”*

As far as the history of the church goes, Christ the King Sunday is a relatively new phenomenon. It was instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius XI in the years following the First World War. In the face of dictators like Mussolini, Pope Pius wanted to underscore the primacy of Christ as ruler of the kings of the earth and of people’s hearts. So, he instituted a feast day that would call individuals as well as rulers to give “public honor and obedience to Christ.” In the encyclical outlining the need for this new festival, Pius reminded the faithful that Christ’s dominion is over all creation and gained by his nature - not seized by violence. This is an important message not only when Europe was poised between two wars in the first half of the twentieth century but also today when we still find ourselves plagued by violence and political power plays. This morning, in a brief moment before the penitence of Advent and the joy of Christmas, we are invited to stop and reflect on what it means to know Christ as King in our lives and in our world.

What *does* that mean for us, though? We live in a democracy where we elect our leaders through civilized, peaceful and respectable means. So, to say that our hearts and lives are ruled by a king who employs nonviolence sounds more like a personal preference or lifestyle choice than a political orientation. What does it mean, then, to recognize Christ as *king*?

Perhaps this question is challenging because we tend to have fairytale visions of what kingship is all about. What associations does the term “king” raise for you? Do you think of royal weddings and palaces? Or does the word conjure up images of jewels, thrones and crowns? When I think of kings my mind can’t help but go straight to the Knights of the Round Table and King Arthur. You see, I love Arthurian literature. I know the words to every song in the musical *Camelot*. In college, I spent a summer traveling around Britain in search of Arthurian legend and lore.

The story of King Arthur has all of the elements that a good knightly tale is supposed to include – drama, intrigue, love, heroism, betrayal, victory, defeat and valiant rescues. But, whether you consider it to be history or legend, what makes the Arthurian drama compelling is the basic fact of Arthur’s idealism. He is a different kind of king. His rule is marked by equality, justice and nonviolence rather than brutality and force.

Throughout literature of many genres, not just Arthurian legend, the king incognito is a common trope. In these stories, a king will disguise himself as a common person in order to move more freely around his kingdom. Sometimes this is done for his own safety in order to help him escape a dangerous situation such as a coup or other treachery. Other times, it is done so that he can learn more about the hearts and minds of his subjects. There is a scene early in the movie, *Camelot*, where Guinevere is *en route* to meet her king to whom she is betrothed. She escapes from her convoy and encounters a man alone in the woods whom she supposes to be a commoner based on his appearance and his solitude.

She begs him to carry her away and save her from the fate of marrying an unknown man. She is later mortified to learn that this man was none other than Arthur, her king, who would often escape the confines of court to be alone in the woods or walk, unnoticed, among his people.

In most accounts of Arthur's life he is presented as a ruler who understands the common folk. He has spent time with them, he has lived with them, eaten with them and had friendships with them. He is not sheltered or protected from them as is the case of so many stories of monarchs and their kingdoms. Arthur knows his people and loves them as kinfolk. He is not an obvious or typical monarch. His leadership is based on compassion, impartiality and solidarity. He is less concerned with his own image as a powerful ruler and is more concerned with the contentment of those around him and the peacefulness of his kingdom.

If we look carefully, we can see several parallels between the birth, life and death of Arthur Pendragon and that of Jesus the Christ. For example, in many accounts, Arthur's paternity is a secret for most of his life. He is raised by a foster father and lives a rather unimposing life until the day comes that he finds himself named as king. Similarly, next week we embark on the journey to Bethlehem to celebrate the humble birth of Jesus who is also raised by a foster father and ultimately destined for kingship.

When Arthur does ascend to the throne, he bases his reign on nonviolent principles of diplomacy and compromise. With "right over might" as his motto, he ushers in a peaceful era marked by a just system of governance. Status and position are based on honor and chivalry rather than aggressive acquisition. The round table that Arthur seeks to institute and is emblematic of his reign is about fairness and equal access, not privilege and hierarchy. It is because of this governing style that Arthur becomes a key figure bridging the transition between ancient Celtic and Christian Britain and who stands as a symbol of the chivalric code. This is a code that is based on Christian principles and is modeled by Christ the King who also gathered a following around him based on charity, compassion and truth.

In another striking parallel, some sources claim that Arthur did not actually die on the battlefield but was ferried away to a secret location to return one day in glory and to reign again in peace.

Camelot starts to crumble when Arthur is betrayed by those who are closest to him: his best knight, his queen and his son. The tragedy of the Arthur legend is that, in the end, Arthur loses. Despite his best attempts to present a different way of building a kingdom, despite his best intentions to demonstrate a monarchy based on trust, truth and love, despite his conviction that might does not outweigh right and justice is about humility, the war-mongers win. In the end, chaos ensues, war breaks out and Camelot is lost – fading into the mists of time (or Avalon depending on which account one reads). In the end, Camelot is unattainable - a wistful, tragedy.

In the final scene of the movie, *Camelot*, Arthur rises early in the morning on the battlefield and is weighed down with grief at the fight that will ensue. He encounters young boy, Tom,

who has run away from home to fight for the ideals that his king and Camelot represent. Arthur charges Tom to leave and save himself and commit the rest of his life to telling the story of Camelot so that it is not forgotten. He sings, “Don’t let it be forgot, that once there was a spot for happily-ever-aftering that was known as Camelot.”

This tragedy, this loss of kingdom is where the Arthurian story and the Christian story part ways. Arthur is clearly meant to be a Christ figure in medieval literature, but a distinction must be made between the medieval king of Britain and the King of the universe. For Christ, death, loss and demise are not the final words. Rather death is defeated and Christ’s kingdom continues. As a matter of fact, the death that is meant to belittle and demean Christ, the death that is meant to put an end to his earthly influence actually results in elevating him higher – literally and spiritually. In the cross Christ is hoisted high above the crowds so that even in the act of dying, he is elevated to a high plane. The kingdom of God is ushered in with Christ’s life, death and resurrection, but it does not stop there. The reign of Christ the King begins with Jesus’ birth in a lowly stable in Bethlehem and it continues until the end of time.

In the story of Christ the King, *we* become Tom, that young boy on the battlefield. We become the ones who are charged to tell the story. “Don’t let it be forgot, that once there was a spot for happily-ever-aftering ...” Except that in the Christian story, the spot that once was still is. The kingdom is here and it is coming ... it is here when we cherish right over might. It is here when we respond to injustice with loving kindness and generosity. It is here when we put others’ needs before our own. It is here when we listen to the voice of truth. And, we live in the promise that it is coming in glory when all creation will be reconciled to God. Our song then becomes, “Don’t let it be forgot that once there was, now there is and soon there will be a spot for happily-ever-aftering ...”

In today’s gospel lesson Jesus also turns the classic literary trope of the king incognito upside down. Sure, like those in so many other stories, he is a king walking among his people largely unrecognized. Pilate, for example, has a hard time seeing the majesty that stands before him. Like those who opposed Arthur’s commitment to equality and non-violence, Pilate represents a system that is built on tyranny and might. Pilate is more concerned with rooting out treason and suppressing a possible up-rising than looking for a peaceable kingdom in his midst. Christ is there, right in front of him, but Pilate does not recognize the truth that stares him in the face and refuses easy answers to his questions.

Unlike the typical king incognito, however, Jesus, is not the kind of regent who puts on civilian clothes in order to learn more about his subjects. Rather, Jesus is the king who puts on the clothing of compassion in order that humankind might know him. In the Incarnation, the King of Kings takes on the ‘clothes’ of the lowly commoner – clothes of flesh — in order that humanity may come to know him better. He comes that we might know him more fully and live more abundantly – to bridge the divide between his kingdom and our world.

One song in the musical, *Camelot*, speaks to the gulf of difference that stands between the kingly and the peasant classes. In this Guinevere asks Arthur what the “simple folk do” to cheer themselves up when they’re blue. He responds with a litany of spirit-raising activities

such as whistling, singing and dancing, and the two try each of these in turn with little success. In the end, King Arthur admits that simple folk sit around and wonder what royal folk would do which only points to the distance between the royalty and their subjects and saddens the royal couple even more.

You would never hear Christ the King singing this song because he knows the answer all too well. Christ *becomes* the simple folk. In the person of Jesus, he bridges the gulf between the ruler and the subjects. He joins us in our suffering and in our joy. In the kingdom of God, there is no mediator between monarch and subject, between regal and regular, because Christ has come to us and made himself one with us: made himself known.

Christ puts on flesh and wears it better than we do. As with all that he touches – life, death, truth - he elevates it to a higher state. We wear our humanity like the tattered rags of a peasant: torn, pock-marked and stained with deep hurt, guilt and crushing sadness, but he wears our humanity as the luxurious robe of a king gilded with compassion, honesty, generosity and sacrifice. Those who believe in the truth of the kingdom that he has to offer recognize him as a king in glory. Christ takes all that we associate with our lowly status as subjects and elevates it through participation in his kingdom. He does this in life and in death. Through his wearing of our flesh, Christ redeems all of humanity. By freeing us from our sins, Christ makes us to be his kingdom. Our peasant rags of earthly despair are changed into bright, heavenly robes of redemption. Christ trades our broken, contrite spirits for the gentle assurance of God's love. We are brought from the streets of sadness into God's courts of glory. And, he does it all through right, not might.

Pilate once called Jesus the king of the Jews, but through his life, death and resurrection, Christ peacefully leads the way to his future kingdom – a kingdom not of this world, a kingdom built on forgiveness and love, a kingdom built on truth. *“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty,*” the once and future king. Amen.