

Christ the King 2025

Luke 23.33-43

There is a saying attributed to the great Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth, which is usually delivered to would-be preachers as advice: *take the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other.*

I have never followed this advice. Why not, is probably a question that my spiritual director and I ought to explore in private. But I recently discovered that the quote, as it is usually given, is incomplete. In an interview with *Time Magazine* in 1963, Barth does recall advising young theologians to "take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both", but he also told them to "interpret newspapers from your Bible". This last bit seems crucial, and makes the whole newspaper thing less...I don't know, unpalatable, for some reason.

Anyway, it seems an act of wilful ignorance for me to preach a sermon on the Feast of Christ the King in this year of our Lord Jesus Christ two thousand and twenty-five without at least acknowledging the fact that it has been the year of, among other things, the No Kings protests, especially in the United States but elsewhere too, including on our own British Isles.

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The phrase “No kings” sits awkwardly here, of course; and not only here in the United Kingdom, the realm of King Charles III, but also here in the Church of England, whose Supreme Governor is said Third Charles.

[Pardon me a brief personal rant here. In 2017, I applied for “indefinite leave to remain” in the UK, which is what we call “permanent residency” here, probably to confuse non-native speakers of English. The phrase “leave to remain” is dastardly. Anyway, as part of the process, I had to sit a “Life in the UK” test, which comprises questions about history, government, and normal life here. One of the bits of information in the syllabus of the test was that the Monarch was the *head* of the Church of England. This is quite wrong, and I imagine the author of the book has now had their citizenship revoked. The Monarch has not been the head of the Church since Elizabeth I’s 1558 Act of Supremacy, which changed the title to avoid the heretical confusion between the King and God. A confusion germane to the theme of today’s Feast.]

Anyway, *No Kings*. Early this year, a few protests were held in reaction to Donald Trump’s second

presidency, and the rhetoric and imagery from his party that sounded and looked alarmingly monarchic to his opponents. Then, on June 14th, President Trump seemed to treat the US Army's 250th anniversary parade as his birthday party, reminiscent of how North Korea fetes its Great Leader.

In response, about 5 million Americans came out to resist what they saw as a decline of democracy and the rise of authoritarianism. Since then, a few other similar events have been held; meanwhile, the Trump Presidency has been testing the outer limits of its power and authority, with critics describing these actions as potential triggers of a constitutional crisis over the United States's balance of power. And so, just last month, on October 18th, 7 million Americans came out in another day of protest—this was the largest political event in US history.

Gatherings of solidarity also popped up around the world, attended by American immigrants as well as like-minded locals, who have noticed that authoritarianism seems to be having a kind of revival this past decade. Nongovernmental organisations that try to measure this sort of thing have found democratic decline in every region in the world. Even those of us who just read the news have noticed that Hungary, Turkey, India, and Myanmar have joined

Russia and China in the transition towards dictatorship. The United States is just a specific case of a general trend, and the protestors—especially outside of the US—are expressing concern about this.

Of course, in some places, including here and Canada and Hawaii, the branding of the protest had to be changed to “No tyrants” or “No *dictators*”, so as not to come across as too anti-monarchic. What they mean, they had to clarify, is that they were against political overreach and the decline of democracy, not monarchy as such. Perhaps what this really reveals is how denuded monarchy has become as a concept, in our modern constitutional monarchies, with our figureheads, they of more pomp than power, more ceremony than authority. Monarchy—from the Greek *monos*, “one”, and *arkhein*, “to rule”—is, etymologically speaking, simply the rule of one; autocracy by any other name, also from Greek: *autos*, “self”, *kratos*, “power”.

What we have here in the United Kingdom is less a monarchy proper than an imitation of one, a bit like a scarecrow, whose job it is to keep destructive forces at bay; or a placeholder, to keep effectively empty the seat of absolute power. In the absence of such a nominal—if rather expensive—figurehead, we risk (so the theory goes) falling for the temptation of

actually vesting an actual person with actual power. A true monarch, who reigns jealously, who wields unilateral power—Latin this time, *unus*, “one” (like *monos*), *lateralis*, “side”—[who wields unilateral power] over all subjects, and perhaps especially against those who would dare to challenge or obstruct them.

On this analysis, constitutional monarchy is, in effect, *anti-monarchical*: that is, it is the preventative measure against the monopoly of power, whether by a single individual or a group, say, the majority, which can of course exercise its own tyranny. And, if so, then there is—and I can’t quite believe I’m saying thing—[if so, then there is something] fundamentally Christian about constitutional monarchy. This is certainly *not* to say that constitutional monarchy is God’s favourite political philosophy, as if there could be such a thing; but it is to say that thinking about constitutional monarchy can help us think about power Christianly.

There is an analogy—admittedly tenuous and fraught with the risk of misinterpretation—[an analogy] between the way in which Charles is King and the way in which Christ is King: and it is precisely in that neither are kings in anything like the traditional, historical, and still intuitive sense. They reign without ruling, to use the old formula. Their method of wielding power is to relinquish it, to lay it down, and

empower instead others to make the world what it will be.

Of course, what our own constitutional monarch does is an imperfect and incomplete version of what Christ does, who chooses not a palace but a trough; not a throne but a cross; not a crown of gold but one of thorns; not public appearances and photo ops, but a palpable absence that somehow feels more real than any royal interaction.

In other words, the Christian view of power is that nobody should have it, be able to wield it over others. This is what it means for Christ to be King: that *no one* should be King, indeed that no one is a King, and all who claim to be, all who clamour to be, are pretenders, usurpers, traitors against the empty throne of Christ. At their best, constitutional monarchies in formally Christian countries should be symbols of this critique of power, and calls to divest ourselves of power. More often than not, they fail at this: our job, as Christians, is to remember anyway, and resist any attempts to fill the throne that should remain resolutely empty.