

Christ the King, Year B, Nov. 21, 2021

The Rev. Meghan Murphy-Gill, Curate, Church of the Ascension

“When you’re announced, you bow from the neck. First time you see the Queen, you say, ‘Your Majesty.’ After that it’s ‘ma’am.’ Rhymes with ‘ham.’ Until you leave, then it’s ‘Your Majesty’ again. Don’t sit until Her Majesty does. Don’t talk until she does. Absolutely no physical contact, other than taking her hand, if and only if she offers it. No small talk unless she invites it. At the end, she’ll buzz, and I’ll come and get you. Bow from the neck and walk back towards me.”

These are the instructions given to Harold Wilson in the Netflix series *The Crown* as he prepares to visit Queen Elizabeth II for the first time upon his election as Prime Minister of Great Britain.

There is a protocol for interfacing with the Sovereign of Great Britain, and it’s particularly restrictive for those not blessed as members of the Royal Family.

These etiquette rules may seem antiquated and stuffy to us, Americans who some 200-plus years ago began our great experiment and rejected monarchy. To the Anglophiles among us (myself included), the rules seem almost charming. They have a romantic quality, largely, I expect, because such rigid formality is quite foreign to our everyday life. But this form of etiquette, while traditional and in many ways beautiful, is also a bit sad. To me, anyway.

I’m no fan of small talk, but what’s the other option when spending time with someone you don’t really know? Awkward silence? Small talk doesn’t have to be superfluous, but a pathway to friendship. “Oh you are a mother of an only child? Me, too.” Can you imagine not instinctively putting out your hand when meeting someone for the first time? How exhausting it must be to have to initiate every single gesture of greeting or affection. How lonely.

We, here at Ascension, share a fondness for a particular formalness, especially in the liturgy. But at the heart of our customs is a mutual reverence for one another. We bow from the neck with every interaction here on the altar, to acknowledge one another’s presence. In contrast to how outside of this place, we mostly just brush past our fellow humans on the sidewalk—or worse, push past each other to get wherever we are going—it feels quite luxurious. Add some smoke and holy water, and it’s at once transcendent and earthy.

But all this etiquette around how to communicate with the Queen just makes her seem less human. The rules and regulations about how to interact with a Sovereign, both figuratively and quite literally, render her untouchable. A bit divine, perhaps. Which I suppose is half the point.

What a stark contrast to the arrival of the King of the Jews in Jerusalem in today’s Gospel. Jesus speaks directly with his followers, not through an emissary sent to establish protocol. He processes into town not in a gleaming carriage or town car, but on the back of a colt — a young male donkey, in Mark’s Gospel. The people welcome him in a breathtakingly makeshift way, with palm branches and the cloaks from their own backs — which I imagine had been made with sturdy, rough cloth. Those who went ahead announced the procession and sang with joy: “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” It was at once a transcendent and earthy experience.

But Jesus’ royal procession wasn’t leading to an earthly throne. No, this procession led to a cross, where this Sovereign would be flanked by two criminals.

We call him who comes in the name of the Lord, our King of Kings. But this symbol under which we worship this so-called King, ought to make us think otherwise. What is so mighty about this man hanging on the cross? What is so noble about those nails in his hands and feet? What is so royal about that crown of thorns?

What is it, then, that we celebrate on this day we call “Christ the King”?

When they each tell the story of Jesus’ execution is told in their gospels, neither Luke nor Matthew nor Mark nor John miss an important detail: the inscription above him reads, “This is the King of the Jews.” This is the crime, for which Jesus was executed. Treason.

Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea knew better than to let this small Jesus movement get too popular, too out of hand. All those miracles they said he was performing. All that preaching about the first should be last and the poor and meek shall inherit the earth. Pilate knew that this man, around whose arrival into the holy city caused a little too much fanfare, could cause problems for Pilate if word got back to the emperor. Pilate knew that those simple words, “This the King of the Jews,” would be a warning sign to anyone who read them.

Or so he thought.

Because this so-called king wasn’t of this earth. This king entered David’s royal city on a donkey. This king had traveled by foot, crossing the countryside in sandals with his ragtag band of friends, staying and eating with anyone who would have them. This king touched lepers. This king mixed his own spit with dirt and smeared it on to the eyes of a blind man. This king’s feet were anointed with the hair of a young woman.

There was no protocol for interfacing with this king. This king wasn’t untouchable. This king lived his entire life on earth, extending his hand. Offering himself completely.

To touch him was to be healed. To touch him was to be changed, to be transformed. And he reached out willingly, always, to everyone by processing toward that cross.

More earthy than any earthly Sovereign, his reign is real, more present, more regal than that of any Queen. His kingdom was formed by his love and his blood. No pomp and circumstance could come close to telegraphing his divinity, because this King is Christ the King. The ineffable, loving, living, present to us at all times God. The God who wants you to be known and loved. Right here. Right now. Whether your clothes are fine or your feet are filthy. Whether you’re healthy or sick. Whether your youth is apparent in the shine of your face or your wisdom is spoken in every wrinkle.

This is Christ the King, the God who is one of us, members of his royal family. The God who we wait for in joyful hope and holy longing.

This is Christ the King, the God who will come to us as a baby boy, born to a young woman in a manger.

Amen.