

## The One True King

Americans have an odd relationship with royalty. In 1776, the patriots were clearly fed up with being ruled by English royalty and that sentiment carried over to quickly squash any talk of elevating the victorious General Washington to a throne as George I of America. Titles of any kind were prohibited in the new Republic. And yet... Over the years, Americans have also manifested a fascination with royalty. Members of foreign royal families who have visited or emigrated to the U.S. have always been treated like, well... like visiting royalty. One of the premier television events of my generation was the royal wedding of Charles and Diana, and Americans avidly followed the news of their children, the disintegration of their marriage and the tragic denouement of Diana's short life. As I was preparing to write this on Friday morning, I found on page two of the Seattle Times the breathless coverage of rumors of an engagement for Charles and Diana's oldest son, William. And Americans seem to always be looking to create their own royalty or royal families. Just think of the coronations of prom queens and their slightly more grown-up successor, Miss America. And how often since the early sixties have the Kennedys been referred to as "America's Royal Family," complete with the designation of John Kennedy's presidency as Camelot.

Many Americans also share a taste for fictional tales of royalty drawn from the history and ancient legends of royal Europe. The Kennedy-Camelot metaphor came easily because of the ongoing popularity of the legend of King Arthur in books, film and on stage. William Shakespeare continues to be the playwright most produced in America and his plays nearly always revolve around royalty, or at least contain royal characters. Henry V, Richard III, and Hamlet, Prince of Denmark head a list of popular characters which contains a panoply of kings, queens, princes, dukes and earls (although not the Duke of Earl).

One of the favorite fictional strands of royal lore for Americans has been the theme of "The One True King." Again, the popularity of the Arthurian legends are witness to this as are the works of those two great Christian novelists of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, C.S. Lewis (with The Chronicles of Narnia) and J.R.R. Tolkien (with The Lord of the Rings). You could add the great Disney movie, "The Lion King," to the list of stories of "The One True King," as well. In that movie, Mufasa's ghost even says to Simba (with that wonderful James Earl Jones voice), "Remember who you are. You are my son and the one true king." In these stories, both old and new, the people and land of the kingdom are suffering because the legitimate royal line has been broken somehow. The king is absent or the king is dead and his heir is missing. There may be pretenders to the throne but they are either weak or evil. The return of the true king, though much anticipated, comes unlooked-for. In some cases, the one true king is unrecognized until he proves himself by a test or by some combination of attributes. One of those attributes is usually prowess at arms but strategic wisdom and personal strength and skill alone are never sufficient to confirm the identity of the one true king. His character must be as strong as his arm – he is a man of truth. The one true king is also known to be a protector of the weak. He is a healer and the establishment of his reign brings peace, prosperity and fertility to both the land and the people.

As I was musing over our lectionary passages this week, I found myself drawn to Jesus' description of his kingdom as being "not of this world" and his mission as being "to testify to the truth," and my mind went to that old phrase, "The One True King," which seemed very similar to me to "King of Truth," a title that Jesus' words seemed to imply. Those stories of "The One

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True King” have always been among my favorites, as you may have surmised by now. To the tales of Arthur and Aslan and Aragorn, I’d add Hamlet, although Shakespeare frustrates the ascension of the rightful heir, taking his play from the realm of fairy tale to that of tragedy. Thinking of those fictional kings and of Christ the King, I wondered, “How does the Gospel compare to those archetypical tales? What truths do the fictions help reveal about the real One True King?”

Certainly, viewed through the lens of story, Jesus matches our expectations of the One True King at several points. Fans of The Chronicles of Narnia will know that Aslan had healing powers over the magic spells of the White Witch and Tolkien aficionados will remember that Aragorn had “healing in his hands.” This was a gift commonly attributed to virtuous kings in ancient and medieval literature & legend; England’s Edward the Confessor is one example. Jesus, of course, was a mighty healer. We read in the Gospels that he was pursued to the point of exhaustion by those seeking healing. Aslan’s return and the reigns of Arthur and Aragorn were marked by prosperity and fruitful harvests. In Shakespeare’s works, as in the Bible, a bad king brings famine while the rightful king restores the balance of Nature. You who are fans of Shakespeare’s plays may remember how this theme is woven through the tragedy of Richard II with much reference to Old Testament understandings of the relationship between king and country. It’s a subject I was once encouraged to publish on, only to discover that a much senior Shakespearean scholar had just gone to press with a book on the same subject. Paul tells us that the ultimate reign of Christ will heal all of Creation, which now groans and travails in pain. Jesus repeatedly shows his preference for the poor and the powerless and, though we do not have a picture in the Gospels of Jesus as a mighty warrior, defending the helpless, John the Revelator certainly foresees something very similar in his vision of the end times.

Still, there are many ways in which Jesus subverts or redefines our expectations of The One True King. In their web-based commentary on today’s lectionary passages, Jeff Krantz and Michael Hardin write, “inasmuch as today is Christ the King Sunday, please note that it is ‘Christ the King under arrest and being interrogated Sunday.’ It is Christ the King being held hostage Sunday. It is Christ the royal political prisoner Sunday. It is Christ the King soon to be beaten and crucified Sunday. It is Christ the innocent [victim and King] Sunday. It is not Christ the powerful King Sunday. It is not Christ the mighty warrior Sunday. It is not Christ the King as Lawgiver and dispenser of punishment Sunday. It is Christ the King-whose-kingdom-is-not-of-this-world Sunday.”

It is also worth remembering that John’s Gospel records Jesus performing a very unregal act just hours before his enforced conversation with Pilate about the nature of his kingdom. He has taken on the guise of a servant and washed his disciples’ feet. And, as he tells Pilate, he will not permit his followers to take up arms on his behalf. This is contrary not only to what our expectations of The One True King might be but also to the common messianic expectations of Jesus’ time, as we were reminded at yesterday’s visit to the Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit, with its War Scrolls and explanation of the hopes of the residents of Qumran for the Shoot of David. Jesus’ kingdom is not of conquest but of truth and, in the words of the Jesuit scholar, John Kavanaugh, “It will not kill for the truth, it will die for it. If Jesus is king, he will be a suffering king. He will not demand ransom. He will be ransom. He will win, not by spilling the blood of others, but by offering up his own.”

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Still, the vision of Revelation shows us a Christ glorified before God's throne as "the ruler of the kings of the earth." Why would this be? If, in fact, the Gospel according to John and the Revelation of John are, as church tradition tells us, written by the same man, why would he be so careful as to present Jesus the suffering King on the one hand and Jesus Triumphant on the other? Why does he explode our expectations of the hero king in the first story and confirm them in the next?

Perhaps there is really no difference between the two portrayals. The glorified Jesus at the opening of Revelation is characterized as "the faithful witness." His mission, he said to Pilate, was to bear witness to the truth and, indeed, he has done that. He has been a faithful witness, in his life and work and in his death, to the truth so boldly stated in another work attributed to this same John, that God is love; that, in fact, God so loved the world that God's only son came and willingly gave up his life for humankind and all creation. Again, Revelation tells us of Jesus Christ, he is "him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood." Jesus is King, the Revelator implies, because he has made the whole world into his Kingdom. "He has made us a kingdom of priests," some translations put it. As the ultimate version of the One True King, Jesus has outdone Arthur, who forged a group of feuding Celtic clans into the nation of Britain. Jesus has made the whole world into one kingdom, one people.

I got a kick this week out of reading part of the commentary on these passages by Mary W. Anderson, a Lutheran pastor in Illinois. "Growing up in the South," she writes, "I often heard the home folks ask of a son's girlfriend, "Who are her people?" They were fishing for two things: a family name and a location." I certainly heard that phrase growing up and I know some of y'all did, too. When we were in Evansville, the college students I mentored and employed often referred to their significant friends as their "peeps" – their people. Pastor Anderson continues, "And it was an unspoken truth that if any significant rubber ever hit any significant road, it was your people that mattered. A "people" was not," she writes, "a biological unit. They didn't necessarily share DNA but perhaps things more bonding: a common story, the foods and meals they are together, the experiences they endured and the hopes that endure through generations. It's good to have a people. Those who have been baptized into Christ Jesus are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. Christ has made of us a people with his kingship. And that kingship is unique, unlike any earthly kingship that is bound by geographic borders. This kingdom is boundless. Christ's rule is not limited to a particular racial or national group. All are welcome, especially the chronically unwelcome ones."

That's the kind of king Jesus is: the suffering king of an unwelcome people. That's the kind of truth that King Jesus bears witness to: that we are bound together by the love of God for us and the love for each other with which God has infused us. Reading our passage from John's Gospel where Jesus speaks of truth, I automatically thought of his more famous statement in that same book, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." Perhaps, given our status as a kingdom of "the chronically unwelcome ones," we should note the paraphrase of this verse by another great Southern writer, Flannery O'Connor, who said, "You shall know the truth and it shall make you odd." It is odd in this day and age to claim to know the truth. Most of our contemporaries would agree with Pilate: "What is truth?"

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I also, when I think of the verse, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free,” think of my friend Ragan Courtney. If you were a teenager in a Southern Baptist church in the 70s or 80s, you almost assuredly sang at least part of the youth rock cantata written by Ragan Courtney and Buryl Red called “Celebrate Life.” In that musical is a song called “The Truth Shall Make You Free” and one of the lines is, “you shall know the truth and love is the proof.” The truth to which Jesus bears witness is the truth that we are free to love one another. We have nothing to fear from other human beings, nothing to fear from God. We are free to love.

Ultimately, I think, that’s what sets the One True King of our reality apart from those fictional kings. All stories of fiction end. England still waits for Arthur to emerge from the Isle of Avalon in their hour of need. Simba fades into memory and is succeeded by his children in the great “circle of life.” Aragorn rules for a golden age, then lays down and dies, leaving Arwen to fade away from a broken heart. But of the story of Christ Jesus, the One True King, there is no end. He is Alpha and Omega, A to Z, the first and the last. His kingdom will have no end. We need not fear the return of the dark times. The Kingdom of God inaugurated by Christ Jesus is here, within us and wherever we take it. No fear, only the truth of love that sets us free. We are the kingdom, a people united, a nation of priests whose task is to represent our loving God to all those around us who are searching for One True King. We are called to boldly go out into the world with the Good News: that there is one who is on the side of the poor and the powerless, that there is one who brings healing and freedom from bondage, that the King is coming, that the King is here!

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost! As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end! Amen, Amen.