

A King like no other

These days – with the coronation of King Charles the third still fresh in some minds – any talk of kings and kingdoms is likely to turn into a lively conversation...about necessity.

Why, some will ask, do we still cling to such ancient rituals and arcane structure of pseudo-power? What's the point of a King – or the sense of a kingdom? Haven't we developed a more sensible, accountable, (pardon me for saying it) a more modern form of government?

The short answer is 'we have' but in Canada, it still starts with the monarch. It is largely ceremonial – mostly imaginary – but it does offer us a framework that has served us reasonably well.

Ah, but the cost, you say – the extravagance at our expense – what good is a kingdom at all except to the king?

True – all of our ideas of empire are tainted. And for good reason. Since humanity began to organize into distinct groups, the advantage given to those who claimed (or took) power are very clear. Why, then, do we still reckon with God as some sort of eternal Emperor? Why would we cling to the idea of Christ as King?

Our first lesson seems an indication that this notion of 'heavenly kingdom' has been a challenge throughout the ages. Kingdoms are what we know – a system with one powerful figure at the top of the pile. History has shown us examples to praise and pity. But at their best, there is something like peace, and people are

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generally better off than if left to fend for themselves. God's kingdom has always been proposed as some super-perfect version of the best earthly empire that anyone could imagine...but there are still problems.

Kingdoms are won and held by force in the human sphere. Kings reign well who reign strong. And somehow the image of heavenly armies of angels don't always bring great comfort.

Prophets and Psalmists have offered those same armies as the solution to our ongoing problems with the unrighteous – the pagan – the stranger – the unbeliever. And promises of heavenly salvation (especially of the thunder and destruction kind) have not often worked out the way we would think. (frankly, who would want to endure such a battle, no matter the reward)
So, Zechariah's words should sit strangely on our ears.

A king is coming (check) establishing a kingdom in the process – so someone is going to pay. This will be a fight with winners and losers...and yet, the king does not seem to be coming in what we'd call strength. Right?

Triumphant and victorious is he (so far so good)
HUMBLE AND RIDING ON A DONKEY – ON A COLT, THE FOAL OF A DONKEY. (say again?)

Humble – ok, but where is the proud charger, fit for a conquering king? How do you think a donkey will fare against a war horse and chariot?

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But restoration and renewal are promised in this most unlikely fashion, and that is a very good start if you want to re-image God's kingdom.

Nothing in God's promised kingdom follows human expectation. This is an empire of real humility – as demonstrated from the very top.

God is God – make no mistake, but there is no ego – victory isn't necessary to prove God's worth. And to prove it, Jesus takes Zechariah's words and brings them to life. As he prepares to meet his most dangerous opponents, he reminds his followers that God's power – God's reign – this new kingdom – does not require violence or threats of violence to meet its goals.

This humble approach does meet with violence – and Jesus' life will be ended by a violent act of a desperate power structure – fighting to maintain a hold. But the victory that God wins is unmistakable...and gentle...and complete.

An empty tomb, that's the first sign. And rather than blow trumpets and wave banners, Jesus simply appears. To the women at the tomb. To the disciples in a locked room. To a few more on the road, where (it seems) he simply walks along - anonymously – until they reach the startling conclusion that this gentle voice of wisdom is indeed their master, risen from the dead.

Jesus' instruction on the road to Emmaus was simple enough. The son of man must suffer, he says. It had to happen because that tendency to violence is built in to failed, sinful human systems.

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But God's systems endure violence and triumph over violence. Not by repaying 'an eye for an eye,' but through the power of humble service, generous compassion, genuine mercy and boundless love.

A king that taught and lived out those virtues – a kingdom whose codes was based on the practice of such selfless actions – this is what we celebrate today. Not because we have seen this kingdom rise up in triumph, but because it is within our power to live, work, and act according to the principles that Jesus taught. As our king, Christ wants no more glory than this: that his 'subjects' embody the love that raised him from the tomb.