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Homily Solemnity of Christ the King - Year B

Peter Knox SJ

Whenever we think of Jesus under a particular title, it's because we've got experience of that title already. When I think of Jesus as Christ the King or the King of the Universe, my mind has to go to kings that I know already. Kings that I don't know in person, but kings whom I've read about.

Recently, in South Africa's news, we've read about several kings, and I'll mention them as we go along. But let's begin first with King Chaka, the founder of the Zulu nation. He was a great and ruthless warrior. He killed thousands of his own soldiers. He waged wars on neighbouring clans and tribes, and he built up the Zulu Empire.

We think of his successor, his most recent successor, King Goodwill Zwelithini. He was largely powerless and ceremonial, yet he was a great force for stability in the Zulu nation. At a crucial moment, he chose national, rather than tribal, allegiance. He put his weight behind the African National Congress rather than behind the Inkatha Freedom Party. And we know, after his death, that there is still infighting for who is going to be his successor.

This week, we read about King Dalindyebo, who received a R 1.8 million Mercedes Benz SUV from Julius Malema, the leader of the EFF, the Economic Freedom Front. Why? Because he encouraged his tribe, the amaThembu, to vote for the EFF. That's a man of some influence.

We think of King Moshoeshe, the founder of the Sotho nation. He brought his people high into the Maloti Mountains to escape the *difaqane*, the tribal wars of the 18th century. Moshoeshe was a skilful diplomat and a man of peace. His successor, King Letsie III of Lesotho. He couldn't even stop an attempted military coup, but he commands great loyalty among the Basotho, even outside Lesotho among the Basotho of Southern Africa.

We think of King Sobuza, the founder of the Swazi nation. He's held in such reverence that his head is still on the emaLangeni coins, the national coin of eSwatini. When we think of his successor, King Mswati III, he's the absolute monarch of eSwatini. He's getting fat while his people die of hunger. At the moment, there is a great protest against his rule, his autocratic style of doing things. He is suppressing this protest violently. Traditionally, he has the choice of maidens who perform at the annual Reed Dance. So far, he has about 13 wives, I believe. That means he's depriving 12 other Swazi men of potential wives. But he is an important symbol for the Swazi, a symbol of the value of fertility.

We think of Seretse Khama, one of the kings (a very early king) of Botswana. But he gave up his royal title to marry his bride, Ruth. The South African government at the time, in the 1940s, did not want a black and white royal right on their border, so the South African government pressurised Britain to make the independent Botswana into a republic and not a kingdom. So Seretse Khama was not the king, but he was the president of independent Botswana.

We think of another king, Edward VIII - also a great lover. He abdicated his throne in the 1930s in the United Kingdom because he wanted to marry Wallis Simpson, a divorcee. For a king to marry a divorcee wasn't acceptable in the 1930s.

We think of the opposite extreme, King Henry VIII, who had six successive wives. He caused the Church of England to split from the Roman Catholic Church because he wouldn't accept the church's teaching on annulment.

On the other hand, we think of King Baudouin of Belgium, who kept the Walloons and the Flemish together through all sorts of political differences. He kept Belgium united. He was much loved. He was a moral man. He was a devout and charismatic Catholic. He refused to sign the law permitting abortion in Belgium. He was very, very committed to Catholic values. So when parliament wanted to sign that law, King Baudouin abdicated for a day so that parliament had to sign it, and he wouldn't.

We think of King Rama IX, the King of Thailand, 86 years old. Frail. We saw pictures of him last year, opening parliament. At the time, he was the world's longest-serving head of state - 68 years. Now his son has taken over from him, living in luxury in Germany, and there are protests for his son's resignation.

We think of Queen Elizabeth II, who wasn't able to attend the memorial day ceremony at the Cenotaph this year for the first time in 23 years. She had sprained her back. She's intelligent, she's informed, she's well-read, she's had 13 British prime ministers serving under her, as well as over 100 prime ministers of Commonwealth countries.

Recently there's been a state of kings and queens of England who have abdicated in favour of their heirs. And the first papal monarch, Benedict XVI, abdicated as well. I would say that when the history books are written, that's probably the most significant thing that Pope Benedict XVI did, was to resign. He opened up for us a new understanding of what it is to be the Bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter, Saint Peter. His resignation tells us that the papacy is not necessarily a life-long ministry.

And then finally, I think of Simba of the Lion King. I think of him singing, 'I just can't wait (and it's a long, long wait) to be king.' I'm sure you all remember Simba wanting to get his hands or his paws on the monarchy. I think of poor Prince Charles. He's been waiting to be king for so long.

There are so many incentives. There are so many reasons why people want to have power and authority. Political and business leaders are often attracted to the smart houses, the public platforms, the flashy cars, the trips overseas, the six-digit salaries, the opulence. And, of course, there is no reason not to find these attractive. By and large, they can be good things if they are used correctly. However, it is tempting to seek the privilege of authority but to avoid the responsibilities that go with that authority. The more we receive, the more is expected of us, Jesus tells us.

A mature leader uses the accoutrements of the office to fulfil the task at hand. Like Simba, on the other hand, an infantile leader does not know how to use these to benefit their constituency. True leaders, undeterred, carry much of the responsibility but receive very little glory.

What has this all got to do with Jesus? Well, today's celebration/solemnity is not just about a form of government: whether it's monarchy or republic, which is better than which. In fact, Jesus is very clear. He says it three times in today's Gospel: "My kingship is not of this world. My kingdom is not of this world." "I'm not like all those kings that Peter has just listed for us."

Christ the King, whom we celebrate today, took on the responsibility of saving the world, and his crown was a crown of thorns. This is often the lot of a true leader, to be wearing a crown of thorns. The Catholic Church has used this feast to support monarchies in various situations. The celebration of Christ the King only came into the liturgical calendar in 1925. Pope Pius XI instituted it in response to growing nationalism and secularism in Europe. It hasn't always been a liturgical feast.

In today's readings, we heard the prophecy of Daniel about the coming of the king with an everlasting dominion. Centuries before Jesus was born, the Jewish people were already waiting for this eternal king. He is robed in majesty, might and power, as we hear in the psalm. The only model that psalmists can think of is a magisterial king, a mighty king, a powerful king.

But Jesus is different to that. He's not like the earthly kings. In the Book of Revelation, John confirms Daniel's prophecy so many hundreds of years earlier. He takes it further: Every eye shall see him, every eye, every single person (Christ is a universal king) shall see him. And those who remain faithful, he will free us from our sins and make us into an eternal kingdom.

In John's Gospel today, Jesus tells us that the king is going to be one who suffers, who is handed over to the Jews. In his book of the *Spiritual Exercises*, St Ignatius of Loyola presents us with the image of an earthly king and a heavenly king. And St Ignatius has us meditate with what loyalty we would follow the heavenly king, the eternal king. We will endure with our king, Christ, all abuse, poverty, and injuries if he chooses this state of life for us, his co-workers.

So we take a composite picture of all the kings we know. We take a picture of majesty. We take the image of fidelity. We take the image of knowledge. We take the image of fecundity (that is great fruitfulness). We take all these bits and pieces from the kings that we know about and apply them to Jesus. And we take just the good bits. We don't take all the other bits and pieces of the lives of these kings and queens. We apply them to Jesus to try to understand what the eternal king is like, what Jesus' kinship is like. We look around at the examples of the good monarchs and try to find out what this feast tells us about Jesus. We think of his wisdom. We think of his dedication to duty. We think of his absolute authority in our lives. "Monarch" means one (mono) leader, one ruler. We can't serve in our lives both God and money, for example. We can have one leader. Our allegiance is to God alone, and as Pope Pius XI said, "not one of our faculties is exempt from his empire." He should reign in our minds, wills, hearts, and bodies if we are to say he is king.

We should think about the leader who commands universal devotion; the leader who receives authority directly from God; the leader who, like Moshoeshoe, creates and leads a new people; the leader who, like Zwelithini, doesn't impose himself but allows people to exercise their dignity of choosing; the leader who represents fertility and life and yet doesn't hoard it all for himself; the leader who has a deep history, 86 years of monarchy, is with us for our whole lives and is not here today and gone tomorrow.

A king represents stability and continuity - tradition. Presidents, mayors, members of parliament, members of provincial governments, they come, and they go. We might change families, countries or cities, but only Christ remains constant for all of us. You obviously have your own ideas of an ideal leader - from kings perhaps in your part of the world or of your ethnic group.

We project all of these good ideals onto Christ, and we cannot stop praising God for giving us a Lord like him. But only Christ has all the virtues that we hope to find in our ideal leader.