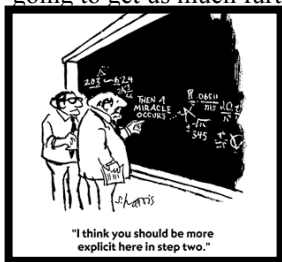


## IS THAT YOUR FINAL ANSWER?

This Sunday is called in the liturgical tradition the feast of Christ the King. I have a little problem with this name – though you would think it would be easier for me than for you.

I know what it is to have a Monarch. I went to see Elizabeth on her first Royal visit to Canada as Queen when I was 6 years old and can sing the second verse to God save the King. My parents took me to see the Queen Mom present the Queen's plate at Woodbine when I was 11 and I won twenty bucks with a bet on Flaming Page to show and there we sang *Dieu protège la reine*. The Pilgrims never intended to break from England. In fact they came to America in part to remain English rather than drift in becoming Dutch. Yet within their theology of religious freedom were the seeds of independence. So that now, born and bred Americans, while still curious about royal shenanigans, are grateful every day that George III got royally put in his place. So my first discomfort with this day is the metaphor of King – what intuitive meaning can it have to 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans? Even if we say as some have done, "I have no king but Jesus", there is still a problem for me – for the primary definition of my relationship with Jesus does not fit the mold of ruler and subject. Jesus says, for example, I no longer call you servants but friends. The conversation with Pilate from today's lessons, shows even Jesus' ambiguous feelings about the title of King - you say I am a king, (not me) – but even if I am, it's not like any kingdom you know. We have a long way to go in understanding the truth of God's relationship with humanity, and theological metaphors born of domination and subjugation are not going to get us much further.



They have said, though perhaps not for a long time in modern universities, that theology is the queen of the sciences. Yet too often we say as Sydney Harris does in the physics cartoon in your bulletin – then a miracle occurs. In theology and

well as in science it will behoove us to be a little more explicit at some points.

Sometimes we get muddled between who God is and what we say about God. Having just stood up from our thanksgiving feast, we should be able to imagine more clearly John's vision of THE great banquet. While on the island of Patmos John wrote that Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Some take that to mean- that the end is the same as the beginning, there is no change. Others that John saw a throne so that must mean a King. Is it too sacrilegious to say that the word throne has other meanings? We believe that God is not fickle. God's allegiances, commitments, friendships do no change. But that does not imply that the way we apprehend God in language, metaphors or relationships is static.

Theology is the quest for more truthful ways to speak about God. This was Jesus point when talking to Pilate – Truthful discourse, not just telling the truth but belonging to the truth. Does anyone remember what Pilate's said in response to Jesus?

Say it – What is truth?

Just as the Monarchy, and even our democracy is a pretty good form of government in the search for better ways to organize power in society, just as physicists keep working on the equation to be more explicit about the miracles of the universe they don't yet understand, so theology is a work in progress, a continual search for a better answer to Pilate's question.

There are at least four expressions of theology that are part of the equation that still needs some work. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, American evangelicals, like us, (don't just give in when others hijack our identity or misuse our language) American evangelicals were on the front lines of the movements to abolish slavery, to give women the right to vote, to mitigate poverty and overcome sharp class divisions. Today we build on their conviction that Jesus came to overcome culturally created injustices. This leads us to a image of Jesus as counter-cultural revolutionary, not a conservative Monarch. They also found unity in Christian spirit rather than doctrine and endowed us with the ability to disagree on matters of theology and still be united in service.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Social Gospel folks welcomed intellectual and technical progress in all its forms as a gift of God. They led the intellectual community in the analysis and critique of structural injustices in society. Because they took the doctrine of the incarnation seriously, we too have been able to embrace this world as our home with all the care that it needs from the least to the greatest of us. Their work on public policy sprang from a spiritual discipline of engaging the bible anew in their generation, and they pass on to us the call to be disciples, not soldiers of Christ.

About the time I was betting on the horses, neo-orthodox theologians were trying to make sense of the monstrous evil loosed in the 20th century. Christians had to find a way forward in community existence, (the church) that is distinct from the world. Though God is always present, God is never reducible to our cultural practices, our political convictions, even, or maybe especially, to our religious beliefs. From the ruins of wars, they call to us to create a distinctive Christ-like identity based in a biblical community that explores, develops and sustains that identity through preaching, liturgy and education.

And in our lifetime, thanks in part to the explosion of communication technology, we are able, as Christ's body on earth to hear a plethora of voices:

The colonially oppressed and militarily repressed  
The abject poor and the terrified refugee  
The racially or ethnically marginalized

## IS THAT YOUR FINAL ANSWER?

Women, children, the ill and disabled,  
Indeed we can even hear the silent cries of the  
earth itself.

If the words of hope that John imagined are to be spoken, "Grace to you and peace"; it will take more than the expectation of a miracle. We will need to be a little more explicit. Yet it is exactly these voices that have by speaking up enabled us to articulate a multitude of theological premises that point us further toward truth. You have heard that God is on the side of the powerless, human and non-human and infers "a preferential option for the poor." While wisdom and virtue is to be found in all people, in all classes, in all races and ethnic groups, the powerless have an especially important contribution to make.

On the quiz shows, you get a couple chances until you have to give your final answer. Some would have jump ahead to give our theological final answer, or to go with what the audience suggests. It feels disrespectful to contradict our elders. It creates anxiety to doubt the ecclesiastical party line especially when you are not actually sure with the final answer is. We come to this table – and there are many theologies here. Among

them - There is an ancient blood sacrifice upon an altar, there are echoes of pagan sacred meals, there is Passover meal of curse and freedom, there is a fellowship of friends marred by betrayal, there is a picture of breakfast on the beach and dinner at an inn on the road to Emmaus. The one thing that does not trouble me about this Sunday is the foreshadowing of the heavenly banquet.

So we come to this table, this morning. The bible tells us that our host is not a wealthy, educated, influential, aristocratic monarch. But Jesus - Jesus - lover of the poor, betrayed by his national leaders, and tortured to death by the Romans, risen now as the Christ to be the hope for all creation. He tells us there is a glorious banquet coming, on a day like the one in John's vision; a day fit for royalty. That is the miracle and here we are with the equation not quite complete. We celebrate, and we work, and we wait in hope, trying to be more explicit but definitely without the final answer. Amen.

**Revelation 1:4b-8**

**John 18:33-37**