

Possibly the worst calamity to befall the Church was the baptism of the Emperor Constantine and the Edict of Thessalonica in AD 380, which proclaimed Christianity as the sole religion of the Roman empire. Christianity as a living faith was tragically compromised: a prophetic, charismatic and visionary *Ecclesia* became an instrument of earthly, imperial authority and it remained so for a very long time. I do not personally believe that the kingdom of God will ever be established in this world, or that it is meant to be; the two realities – the first only partially and temporarily real – are too far apart ever to occupy the same spiritual space. This is because the kingdom is not an external reality but an *interior* one, a way of understanding human life in the radiance of divine Being. After AD 380, that interiority gave way to a concrete, material ecclesiastical presence that would defend itself by hierarchy, dogma, creeds and, in the end, force of arms.

The Feast of Christ the King was promulgated by Pius XI in 1925 in his encyclical *Quas Primas*. It was written in the aftermath of World War I, which saw the fall of several imperial dynasties: the Hohenzollerns, Romanovs, Habsburgs, and the Ottoman Turks. In contrast, the pope pointed to Christ's kingdom as an everlasting and universal one that will never fall. In the encyclical he writes: "... the Word of God, as consubstantial with the Father, has all things in common with him, and therefore has necessarily supreme and absolute dominion over all things created."

Although Pius XI was distancing himself and the faithful from the old understanding of the Church as a temporal power, I still find it hard to understand what a necessary 'supreme and absolute dominion over all thing created' could mean. 'Dominion' means to rule over, have charge of, to possess ascendancy, authority and sway. I can't comfortably predicate any of these things of the Lord Jesus. It also seems to suggest that ascendancy and authority is something temporal, material, *literal*. The wording itself echoes the edicts and decrees of the imperial Church in the east and, later, in the west; because for many centuries the pope was an earthly king with temporal power over a great swathe of territory in Italy called the 'Papal States'. This only came to an end on 20th September 1870, when soldiers of the Risorgimento breached the walls of Rome and the city was annexed to the newly born Kingdom of Italy; before then, Italy had been a motley collection of states, kingdoms, dukedoms and principalities. The pope's personal freedom and independence was regained in 1929 when the Vatican signed a concordat with Mussolini, the Lateran Treaty, which established the Vatican as a sovereign state. This is a long way from AD380, when Christianity was declared the official religion of the Roman empire, but it's a long-unfolding consequence of that declaration.

That's the history lesson over, but it still leaves me with the question: What kind of kingship is Christ's? Not like any kingdom on earth that we know of. He himself said to Pilate:

‘My kingdom is not of this world.’ The worst mistake we can make is to think that it has anything whatsoever to do with emperors or empires, papal states or authoritarian rule, or that it is to be established on this earth and in this life. That would be a travesty. The kingship of the Lord Jesus, above all, is one of love, not authority, power, rule or dominion. And love does not need to govern, but only to draw to itself; the primacy of love can never be resisted, but it can for a long time be hated, fought-against and rejected – just as the Lord of Love himself was. Christ Jesus’ kingdom does not have laws, regulations, obligations or penalties: it has only the impulse that all beings should be one. This is the meaning of love in all its myriad forms, even the most distorted and wayward: to be one. It is not so much a kingdom as a communion, a unitive state of being. Love always seeks to be one because love is God and God is One. Here I would like to share with you a paragraph from the writings of a neo-Hassidic rabbi, Arthur Green. He is speaking of the unitive vision that love gives us sight of:

“There is only One. That is the great truth of mysticism, found within and reaching beyond all religions. That One embraces, surrounds, and fills all the infinitely varied forms that existence has taken and ever will take. Daily experience of variety, separate identity, and alienation of self from other renders an incomplete and ultimately misleading picture of reality. ‘You were one before the world was created you are one since the world was created.’ Unchanged, eternal;

worldly existence covers over the reality of that deeper truth, but human consciousness is so created as to permit glimpses of it to shine through. The one Being is clothed within each individual being. For reasons we do not begin to understand, that One dressed itself in this 'coat of many colours' called the universe, and on this earth entered into the endless dance of variety and multiplicity that we called creation. It is present within each unique form of existence that has come to be in the universe, and yet remains One, in and through them all."

This is the true kingdom where Christ the Incarnate Son is king, whose crown and sceptre is love. Small wonder Pilate did not grasp the Lord's meaning when he said that his kingdom was not of this world. Who could grasp it then, in those ancient days when Rome ruled two-thirds of the known world and the emperor was divine, when 'kingdom' meant an earthly realm and authority was established by the sword? It is not grasped today, either, in a world that perpetuates itself with the instruments of greed, wealth, oppression, persecution and conflict. We don't have to forget that there's a lot of joy, happiness and pleasure for many in this life, but we do have to remember that its kingdoms and empires – according to the gospel – belong to the devil.

The Feast of Christ the King is particularly associated with Youth – it is also Youth Sunday – because it invites young people to enthrone Christ as king in their hearts, before the many false monarchs of our contemporary society

get there first. In our day, these ‘principalities and powers’ (Ephesians 3:10) would suck the lifeblood out of the young – especially through social media – with promises of fame, quick money, the adulation of their peers, ‘true’ love and celebrity status. This is a phenomenon known only to our contemporary society because it has been possible by the astonishing advances in technology that we have seen. All this, distorted and meretricious though it is, promises a young person that they are special and that their life has meaning. Here is the cause of every modern malaise: a lack of meaning. The human person cannot live without it – unless his name happens to be Dawkins.

It is all the more important, then, that the Church can offer an authentic and abiding meaning to the lives of our young people. It is *not* an easy task! There is a huge amount of opposition; but it has never been my belief that the Church should ‘adapt’ to the modern world, the world that young people live in. It isn’t a matter of adapting but of *understanding*; and we must find a mutually intelligible language to share that understanding. The first instinct is for us to reject that world as alien, but this wouldn’t be very helpful. Besides, every world is alien to the one that preceded it. Each age has its own youth culture – including our own – and its very particular temptation for young people to enter the shadows and stay there. The Church must above all be an instrument and vessel of love, if it is to lead them out of those shadows... because only the power of

love can do this, even for the most lost, angry or wounded young person. St John of the Cross said: “Where you do not find love, pour love in and you will soon draw love out.” I absolutely believe that. No one – no one – can resist the call of love; because love understands, affirms, values, treasures and touches the most secret chamber of the human heart in a way that causes an exquisite pain we would never wish to cease. All the more reason for us to say that the Christ’s kingship is not one of dominion or authority and governance, but of unconditional love. Love is the thief of all hearts.

I’m not young anymore. I can be a terrible Pharisee and I know it. Sometimes I’m so lacking in love I could bow my head in shame. My heart can be so heavy with pride, resentment, negativity, anger and self-defensiveness, that I sometimes wonder why God bothers with me at all. Yet he does. So He has all the more reason to bother with our young people: because in them is a future generation that does not want to live a faith that is dominated by rules and regulations and lists of sins and punishments, but that is rooted in the authentic movements of the heart; a generation that does not judge others on what they look like, or what race they are, or whether they are gay or straight or the background they come from or what their IQ is – but on respect, understanding and a recognition of the innate dignity of every human person; a generation that cares about the earth that God gave us to take care of and which we have made so terribly sick, a generation that knows the ways of co-

operation between peoples as the only survival mode we have. Astonishingly – and heart-gladdeningly – this generation already exists. Young people today, of whatever faith or none, seem to be without all the instinctive prejudices and judgements of an older generation. These are the young people – the Church of tomorrow – that we encourage to invite Christ to enter their hearts. I strongly suspect he is already there.