

Noblesse Oblige

An old student of mine has a hobby that fascinates me. He keeps up on all the royal families of Europe, throned or dethroned. There is a whole field of periodicals and books that tracks surviving royalty who maintain an undercurrent of social life far removed from the hoi polloi.

Of course none of them have any political power. Many a dynasty was swept away during or after the First World War – just at the time when Pope Pius XI set up today's Feast of Christ the King. It may be that's *why* he did it, because royalty was going out of style with dictatorships and democracies now governing the world. I mean up to the 1920's royalty and coronations were frequently in the news. Today royals are so immersed among common celebrities that they are no longer taken seriously. Which raises the question: Does declaring Jesus to be King of the Universe have any clout nowadays? And especially in a universe in which our globe is but a pinch of dust?

The Bible has a mixed attitude toward royalty. Back around 1000 BC the Israelites were struggling to survive assaults by competitors for that meager strip of land we call Palestine. But the Israelites were handicapped: they were still an association of tribes, each loyal to its own issues than to those of others – and so, hard to unite against a common enemy. Survival demanded solidarity – as with our own original colonies – so there grew a demand for a *central* government and an absolute ruler, a king.

The prophet Samuel lobbied against this idea. He warned that a central monarch in a capital city with a standing army would mean class distinctions, bureaucracy, and taxes. Tribal rights would give way to a universal discipline; once coequal Israelites would be reduced to soldier, tinker, tailor, servant, housemaid, *lay people* subordinate to courtiers and imperial ambitions. Samuel lost the argument and kingship was launched – made glorious by David but soon becoming tyrannical. Civil war soon split David's empire; in other words, Samuel was right! Subsequent monarchs fumbled around until the big boys with the big armies wiped out Israel's monarchy. The last king of Judah was lucky to have a seat at the Babylonian Emperor's dinner table.

Yet nostalgia for that royal moment in Hebrew history remained up to the time of Jesus – whose followers thought for sure would be their new David. One gets the impression Jesus would not have encouraged that idea. Today's parable exhibits a stern identification with people who are hungry, thirsty, lacking clothing, imprisoned, exposed, migrants – hardly people you would find in palaces. **Or, if it is appropriate to declare Jesus a king**, could it be because he came to *democratize* royalty – and more – to reveal the fact that we are each indeed royal, noble, by the very fact that we are the offspring of the very Source of this palatial universe. And so today maybe I should identify with Rip Van Winkle who, after awaking from 20 years of sleep that left him unknowing of the American Revolution, wandered into a local political rally and was asked whether he was a Federalist or a Democrat and innocently replied: *I am a poor and quiet man . . . and a loyal subject of the King. God bless him!*

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