Feast of Christ the King, Cycle B

St. Mary’s, 2021

There seems to be a consensus

That the homily is not an opportunity

For the preacher’s self-disclosure

Or the peddling of some personal agenda.

There are even particular instructions

From bishops and even popes

That the ambo is not to be a bully pulpit

Particularly when it comes to political passions.

While I generally agree with those perspectives

It is also clear that preachers remain themselves

When they approach any pulpit

And cannot help but reveal – at least implicitly,

Their social and political

Religious and personal beliefs in the preaching act.

The task, therefore, seems to be one of self-awareness

The preacher being aware of his or her

Prejudices, preferences and personal bugaboos

And admit them when necessary.

In that spirit of full disclosure

I have to admit that I am not a great fan of this feast

And find it at least perplexing if not problematic.

This is not an ancient feast of the Church

And only came into existence in the 1920’s

A time of troubling nationalism after World War II

And a period when popes were battling the Italian government

About the independence of papal territories

And the pope’s claim to be an autonomous ruler.

Thus, the feast originated as a not too subtle jab

At then existing kings, dictators and political strongmen

Ritualizing that they were not the final arbiters of power

And that their sovereignty paled

In comparison to that of Christ.

So this feast made political sense back in the day,

But what is its significance in 2021

Especially in 21st century U.S.

a country that originated with the utter rejection monarchy?

In the words of one blogger, the idea of the kingship of Christ

Might have meant something in the political climate

90 years ago

But now it’s like celebrating Christ the CEO Sunday.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Last spring I was teaching an on-line course

About preaching with the sciences.

One group of students[[2]](#footnote-2) was assigned Christ the King Sunday

And offered me some help in reassessing this feast

By considering the science behind our imaginations

Specifically the process known as mental synthesis.

According to this theory our brain takes familiar images or ideas

Places them in dialogue with other familiar images/ideas

And reassembles this combination in new ways.

Thus, our brains develop a concept of a dolphin

By encode various characteristics of dolphins in our brains

As a collection, an assembly of neurons

We also have an ensemble of neurons

For a concept like a pineapple

With its own array of images and characteristics

That together comprise a complete mental image.

The theory of mental synthesis holds

That if we simultaneously activate the neuronal ensemble

For both dolphin and pineapple

We can perceive these two ensembles together

As a single image

And can imagine something as absurd as

a dolphin balancing a pineapple on its nose.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It is this ability that allows the human brain

To create a seemingly endless array of novel images

That we have never experienced or physical perceived:

From zebras on surfboards to tennis in space

From Dolphins juggling pineapples to Jesus trying on kingship

However, for this to make any spiritual difference in our lives

It is necessary for the prefrontal cortex in the brain

To secure a mutual and ethical alliance with faith

Wherever that is located in our fragile being.

One blogger underscores that necessity by noting this dilemma:

She writes, “if we are going to celebrate a king here today at least it could be one who will wipe out all the racists and those who do violence to women and those who hurt children and everyone who is more interested in protecting the wealth of the rich than protecting the wellbeing of the poor. I want Christ to be a king who can wipe out Isis and Al Qaeda and Boko Haram and the people who cancelled [my favorite TV series]. But considering the number of bombings and shootings and hate crimes toward trans people that are daily events, then if Christ is my king he’s doing a lousy job of smiting my enemies.

But the problem is (she continues) that when that vengeance seeking and violent part of me calls out to have a king who would destroy my enemies I inevitably would be the one that same king would have to destroy … since God is the God of all and I too am someone’s enemy. And where does that leave us?[[4]](#footnote-4)

Good question!

In today’s gospel Jesus declares that his kingdom

Is not of this world

Is not like those established by czars and dictators

Political power peddlers and strong men

Not rooted in violence but founded in love.

This kingdom requires not just an exercise in mental synthesis

But a plunge into what Walter Brueggemann called

A prophetic imagination:

A political, economic and social subversion that would value

Peace-making instead of war mongering

Liberation not exploitation

Sacrifice rather than subjugation

Mercy not vengeance

Care for the vulnerable instead of privileges for the powerful

Generosity instead of greed

Humility rather than hubris

Embrace rather than exclusion.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Now subversion is ordinarily not how most of us think of Christianity

Or even Catholicism.

We’re taught to be good citizens

To listen to authority

To follow the laws of church and country

And to be good team players “on earth as it is in heaven.”

It might be surprising to learn, however,

That in our origins Christians were often accused of sedition

The same charge that got Jesus killed.

Followers of Jesus regularly rejected Caesar

As some kind of deity-emperor

And were regularly executed for their beliefs.

A former professor Robert Wilken

Wrote an eye-opening little book:

*The Christians as the Romans saw them[[6]](#footnote-6)*

In which he documents how Christians were dubbed

haters of mankind

People who shirked their civic duty

Had great disregard for tradition

And were dismissed as a fringe organization.

Now you might be asking yourself

So is the crazy priest actually using the homily

To invite us into seditious, anarchistic, insurrectionist action?

In a word “no” … however …

I do think Jesus Christ, especially as revealed in this feast,

Is inviting us to the subversive side of Christianity

Something often papered over, even lost

As Christianity and U.S. citizenship

Increasingly are less perceived

As two distinctive ensembles of neurons

That can imaginatively be brought together

And appear like an all too common, even banal neural fusion

Sapped of the edginess

That got our founder crucified.

Years ago I had a wonderful colleague

Who taught with me in a doctoral program in ministry

Who was a huge fan of children’s books.

At first, I was a little taken aback by this

She was so no-nonsense, experienced, practical,

And sometimes scandalously honest

That I thought this completely out of character.

But then I came to understand what Connie instinctively knew

Many children’s books are quite subversive.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Classics like “The Red Balloon” (1956)

Are almost forerunners of all of those John Hughes movies

[remember “The Breakfast Club”]

That confirm that adults are often quite wrong

Certainly not all knowing

And sometimes abusive.

Everybody knows the 1930 classic

“The Little Engine that Could”

But if you read it closely

The engine that breaks down in the beginning

And the only engine that appears compassionate

Are both girls …

While the other engines who refuse to help

The new passenger engine

The powerful freight engine

And the rusty old engine … are all male!

An early manifesto for girl power?

Think of how subversive is the classic

“The Story of Ferdinand” (1936)

Which casts a strong and mighty bull

As a flower sniffing pacifist

Whose refusal to fight saves his and multiple other lives

And then there’s the beloved Dr. Seuss

Who once admitted in an interview: “I’m subversive as hell!”

While trying to avoid sledgehammer morals in his books

He tackled serious issues and left no doubt

About his disdain for corporate greed

Materialism

And authoritarianism.

His “Yertle the Turtle” (1950) is almost a call to revolution

After turtles in a nice little pond

Are happy and content

Until their self-appointed and delusional king

Announces he is “ruler of all that I see”

Problem is that he doesn’t see enough

So he orders the turtles to pile on top of each other

Progressing from a 9-turtle throne

To a 200-turtle throne

To a 5,607-turtle throne

Until Mack, a little guy at the bottom of the stack

Burps, topples the whole turtle stack,

And frees all turtles from stacking oppression.

In his story “The Lorax”

Seuss lambasts the greed of the Once-ler

Who chopped won every single Truffula tree

Polluting air and water

In order to keep on “biggering and biggering”

In the end, even the Once-ler comes to his senses

Telling a little boy:

“unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot,

Nothing is going to get better. It’s not.”

In the spirit of Mack the turtle

Maybe it is time for Catholic Christians metaphorically

again to burb

To care a whole awful lot

About God’s reign as revealed in our subversive Jesus

Otherwise “nothing is going to get better. It’s not”

We pray it will, as we embrace the revolutionary vision

Of God’s shocking and loving plan

For all of humanity

through Christ our Lord.

1. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2015/12/fall-on-your-knees-a-sermon-for-christ-the-king-sunday/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Carl Gales, Derek Nguyen, and Hot Huta Simatupang [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See the TED talk by Andrew Vyshedskiy that illustrates this process at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7uXAlXdTe4> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2015/12/fall-on-your-knees-a-sermon-for-christ-the-king-sunday/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20121119JJ.shtml> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans saw them,* 2nd ed. (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Much of what follows comes from <https://www.today.com/parents/9-most-subversive-children-s-books-ever-written-t83696> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)