

Pair of Kings

King Rama IX of Thailand is the world's longest-serving head of state. He came to the throne sixty years ago, when his brother, King Rama XVIII, was murdered, by whom we may never know. The king's subjects revere him, or at least they swear they do.

His full official name is enough to bend their knees: Phrabat Somdej Phra Paramindra Maha Bhumibol Adulyadej Mahitaladhibet Ramadhibodi Chakrinarubodindara Sayamindaradhiraj Boromanatbophit.

In Thailand, they say that his wife is one the world's great beauties, and marvel at his patents for seeding rainclouds: he truly is a rain king. They celebrate him as a jazz musician, painter, photographer, and biographer of Marshall Tito, once the authoritarian president of Yugoslavia.

Kim Jong-Il, premier of North Korea, likes to be called "a great man produced by heaven," "the most famous general in the world," and "a peerless great man." Nicolae Ceausescu, the former president of Romania, styled himself as "the Genius of the Carpathians," and his wife as "the Best Mother Romania Could Have." Stalin liked to hear himself called "the sublime strategist of all times and nations." Chairman Mao didn't believe in God, but called himself "Savior of China."

The president of tiny Turkmenistan, a former Soviet satellite, chose the title Turkmenbashi, or Great Turkman. He even changed the calendar, and renamed the month of January after himself, while April was renamed for his mother. After closing the universities and all the rural libraries on the grounds that real Turkmen do not read, he made his own book of so-called "spiritual guidance" mandatory reading. At the top of a monumental arch was a golden statue of him that turned so it would always face the sun. "I'm personally against seeing my pictures and statues in the streets," he said, "but it's what the people want."

The Great Turkman died last year, just before Christmas – an exquisitely-timed exit, come to think of it. As a younger man, he had had white hair, but at his death it was black.

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The long Christian year reaches its end this week. With next Sunday, the first of Advent, we mark a new one. But really, this week takes us beyond time, to a power without beginning or end.

This is Christ the King Sunday, the exclamation mark to everything the Christian year proclaims. We say that Jesus, once a poor man put to death two thousand years ago, is the central power in the world today, and our entire hope for tomorrow.

That is an audacious claim. If it doesn't seem utterly ridiculous to you, then maybe you're missing the point, because the claim should make you bow your head and buckle your knees.

Certainly he spooked Pontius Pilate. As this bloodied working man stood before him, Pilate asked, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus replied, "My kingdom is not of this world."

But in another sense, which Pilate could only begin to appreciate, Jesus' reign *is* of this world, and has great implications for the here and now, the high and mighty, the haves and the have-nots.

As one writer has said, "neither angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

On the face of it, Jesus didn't get a lot done. He didn't build a road, establish trade, or make powerful alliances. All he did was wander the countryside for three years.

The reign of a king can last ten years, twenty, forty, fifty, which seems like a long time – until you take the long view, when it seems more like vanity. Especially compared to the long life of that Galilean.

Jesus and Pilate make an interesting pair of kings. One man thought that with his marble palace he had achieved lasting fame; the other may not have realized that in his dusty workshop, with a few disciples, he had found eternity.

Plainly these kings come from two different decks. But really, only one of them is two-dimensional. The other seems to have dimensions we haven't fully discovered yet.

Grace to you and peace from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account, all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Revelation 1:5-8

This is the sort of claim that made Pilate snort in derision. It sounds preposterous even to us. But consider how Jesus has taken broken people and made them whole; taken very different people and made them family. In the words of scripture, he has “*made us to be a kingdom.*”

Without any physical force, Jesus has launched a revolution and invited us to share in the kingdom of God. Think of Jesus telling his disciples during the Last Supper, “I confer on you, as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom; so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

What this means is that at the grassroots level, we are renovating the world. Any king can build something and throw it away, but Jesus has chosen to salvage creation. He has given everything for us. And even as we put all our hopes for the future in him, he puts all his hopes on us.

He is asking in what kind of kingdom we want to live...and if we will help to build it. It may seem dependent and weak, but this is what makes him so powerful.

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The rulers of this world pass out of power so quickly. A few weeks ago, a curious advertisement began appearing in glossy magazines: it shows Mikhail Gorbachev being driven past the Berlin Wall; the former Communist leader has at his side a bag by Louis Vuitton.

Well, it's not hard to imagine that Jesus came to displace persons like Mr. Gorbachev. For most of Christian history, the revolutionary message that even kings have to serve Christ has given hope to ordinary people. But Jesus has not come just to challenge Pilate or Mr. Gorbachev.

Here is a man in a cotton robe, reclining on his throne. He spends the morning in this Great Room, yawning as people bring him the news, the weather, the sports, and entertain him. He bends down to pat the dog, and with his electronic scepter he changes the channel. Someone has already prepared his meal. Someone has delivered the morning paper. He looks forward to games, but can't quite shake the feeling that he should be doing more with his life.

When every man's home is his castle, who bows for a king? What are we to do, you and I, the lords of our manors, when the Lord comes?

Surely the Christian calendar is right: Advent means an end to something. The king or queen he threatens is *us*; the rule he will overthrow is our own. We have reason to be unsettled, you and I, we have reason to kill him in his crib. If we let him grow up, he is going to change everything.

He is going to ask us to build his kingdom. It will have a very different shape; when he talks about building equity, he will mean something different; when he talks about a mansion with many rooms, he also has something else in mind....

This king has come to overthrow us. So let's think twice before we acclaim him. If we're not ready to be anyone's servant, if we're not ready to give anything up, then December can remain December rather than Advent.

Maybe in the end we will decide that he is our best hope for tomorrow – that he offers the most practical way to peace, the sanest, most gracious, most fully human life. Maybe someday we will trust him for putting such trust in us. After all, in other ways, he has turned out to be right. And that is what makes him so powerful.