

Christ in Majesty, or Christ the Almighty Ruler? A reflection on different images of Christ.

If you grew up in a church derived from the Western (Roman) tradition, you probably have many images of Christ the King or Christ in Majesty to draw upon in your memory. They have existed since at least the fourth century and continue to be created into the current period. Here is a version from 1916 at Westminster Cathedral. It includes the Latin inscription which reads “Lord Jesus King and Redeemer. Save us by your blood.”

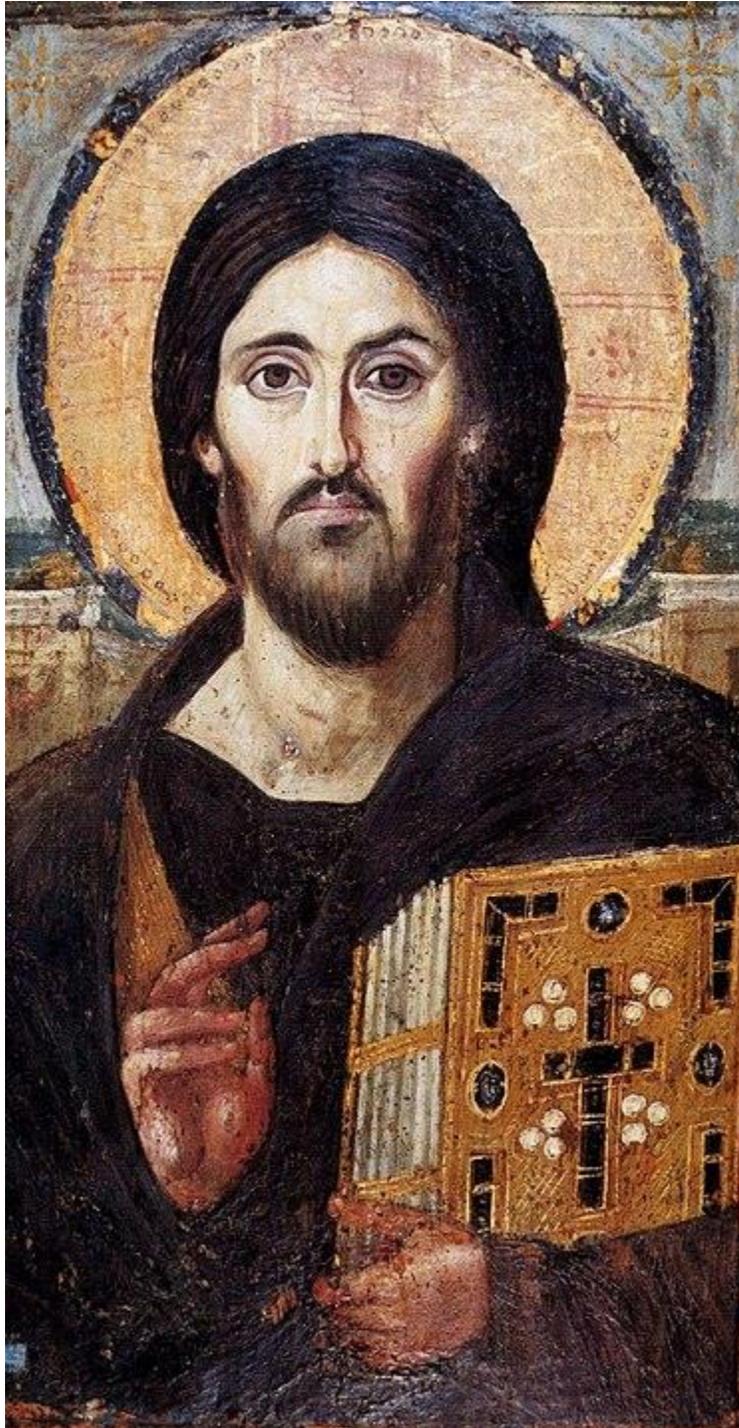


While scenes like this do stir some reverence in me, I do not relate to this image of Christ as much as to others. It's not that I do not see Christ as ruler and redeemer of all, but that he is very strongly connected to a specific image of kingship that I don't think reflects the witness of scripture or my own life experience with the rule of Christ. Christ is king of our world because he manifests the merciful justice of God the Creator. Depicting him as a king or an emperor of a human system of government diminishes this by association with the violence and suppression required to maintain such a system.

I would like to give you another possible image from the tradition to consider as we prepare to celebrate the final Sunday after Pentecost, which the Roman Church has recently encouraged its members to call "the Feast of Christ the King." Lutherans, Episcopalians and others have adopted this term because the readings for the day and the themes of Christ as the goal of all creation, the ruler of all things in heaven and on earth, and the fulfillment of the law make sense. Since all Sundays are feasts celebrating the reign of Christ, I don't mind celebrating this, but if we are to do so, it's a good time to

reflect on how we see that rule and how it shapes our own relationship to authority. When I think of Christ the ruler, I think of a quite different image than the one above.

This is the oldest known icon of Christ Pantocrator (Christ the Almighty or Christ the Ruler). I find it



useful in contemplating the different ways we see Jesus Christ as Lord, or King, or Ruler. For centuries, the Eastern churches have depicted Christ the Ruler in this way. He is shown in half portrait, all alone. There is a golden halo with a cross showing his majesty and his triumph over death, but unlike in Western art showing Christus Rex (Christ the King), he is not seated on a throne or shown or crowned like a human king. In his left hand he holds a copy of the gospels. His right hand is raised in a traditional gesture of blessing that some priests still use today. The right hand also resembles a rhetorical gesture showing the right so speak. The Christ is presented as the source of wisdom, the judge of righteousness. Most strikingly, his authority comes without any suggestion of military power. This is the image of Christ who rules us as a lawgiver and a teacher, not as a dominator. The eyes are different on the left and the right, which suggests the two ways that Christ sees the viewer. One is piercing, perhaps seeing our sins. One is open and soft, regarding us with love, patience and mercy. The justice of God is like this. The hand of blessing and the wisdom of God revealed in scripture and the Christ are there for us even in the moment of judgement. We can always repent and return to this loving God.

I prefer this image to the image of Christ the King that the Western church

developed over the medieval period. From the early depictions of Christ and the Evangelists, the “court” surrounding the Western Christ in Majesty became more and more crowded, reflecting the way that

kings consolidated power by ruling over a large group of nobles who in turn ruled the common folk. Christ depicted in this way is not the kind of ruler who teaches peace, but one who suppresses others through war. It may be a realistic depiction of what kings became, but it is not Biblical. Divine kingship is different than that exercised by humans. The rule of God is for the benefit of the creatures of God, and it only may be exercised by God. That is why the picture of Christ Pantocrator does not include Mary, or the disciples, or even the evangelists. The rule of God belongs to God alone. All human systems of power and authority are imperfect next to the rule of the Holy One. Indeed, the goal of God's rule is different than that of human rulers. No matter how benevolent, one of the goals of nearly every human ruler is to maintain their power. Some modern systems of government regulate terms of office so that a rule cannot maintain power indefinitely, but this is itself a reaction to that imperative in most human rulers. Christ does not have this goal, and his rule is liberating rather than constraining on the ruled.

When the Israelites asked God for a king so that they would be like the other nations around them, God agreed, but warned them that they would not be happy with their king, because human kingship is not at all like God's rule. Human kings in the ancient world, in the medieval European era, and even now rule by being stronger than other people. They preserve peace by monopolizing violence. Jesus came with a different kind of authority, one that is based in the wisdom of the creator who wants all the creation to flourish. When Jesus comes to judge the creation, it will not be to uphold the strongest, but to care for the weakest, to bring all of God's creatures into harmony. Domination does not accomplish this, but the teaching of Jesus does. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus takes authority by reading from the prophet Isaiah, rooting his teaching in care for the poor, ending injustice, and freeing captives. (Luke 4:16-30). For doing this, the crowd in the temple tries to throw him off a cliff. This kind of authority is not easily accepted in human societies.

Through the prophet Samuel, God said the following to the Israelites about kings: "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day." (1 Samuel 8:10-18)

As you reflect on your images of God and your images of Christ, I invite you to pray with the icon of Christ Pantocrator. To consider that Christ the King or the Almighty may not be the kind of ruler that an ancient emperor or a medieval monarch would recognize. God has given us a king in himself, who is the end of empires and structures of domination. He is the opposite of the king Samuel warned the Israelites about. He is the King who rules not by force but by love.