

One of my closest friends from college is a high level diplomat from the State of Qatar. The name of his country is typically mispronounced by the news media, so you may have heard it pronounced as “Gutter”. I assure that isn’t correct. Regardless of the pronunciation it is a very energy wealthy Middle Eastern country ruled by its’ Emir.

When Saad came to visit me and Julie about 15 years ago, he had already been his country’s ambassador to the United States, Mexico and Venezuela for several years. Since I’ve never lived under a king I could hardly imagine what that meant, but what happened during his visit provided me with a powerful lesson on the subject that I’ve never forgotten.

Toward the end of his visit we were driving across the Bay Bridge heading into San Francisco when his phone rang. He answered very politely and professionally, but it was a very brief conversation, perhaps only 2 or 3 minutes in duration. When he said goodbye he hung up and turned to me and said, “That was the Foreign Minister. I’ve been told to return home for another mission. I’m no longer the Ambassador to the US.”

I asked if he had challenged the new appointment, as I know he loves being in the US, and he responded, “My brother, they were not calling to consult with me. They were giving me my orders. When the Emir speaks, I go where I’m told to go.”

That’s the basic protocol in absolute monarchies: the king or Emir speaks, the subject listens and follows orders. That was my first exposure to the reality of being a royal subject, and it left a lasting impression.

Our vision of kings and other autocratic leaders in our earthly realm is typically not a very positive one. They make rules and send their henchmen out to enforce them. The people have little or no say about their lives and many of them live in fear of saying or doing the wrong thing and suffering for it. So while we marvel at the trappings of Buckingham Palace, for instance, in reality many Americans don’t think very highly of kings in general.

They have a reputation as being autocratic, unquestionable and unapproachable.

Why does the Church feel the need, then, for a feast that celebrates Christ as King of the universe? After all, a good case could be made that we celebrate Christ’s sovereignty as King throughout the entire Church year. In Advent and Christmas we long for and then revel in the arrival of Christ as a “newborn king.”

On Palm Sunday we recall Jesus very king-like entry into Jerusalem and on Easter we celebrate Christ the risen King who has even triumphed over death. So why do we need to set aside a special feast day or solemnity that celebrates “Christ the King?”

It’s important to note that this is a relatively new feast on the Church calendar, a feast that has been celebrated for less than 100 years. It was established by Pope Pius XI in 1925 in response to what he saw going on in the world. WWI had ended seven years earlier, but chaos reigned as monarchies fell and communists and fascists took the reins of power.

In Asia, Japanese militarists were usurping power and imposing their rule on their neighbors’ countries. But whether it was militarists, communists or fascists, Pope Pius XI was witnessing the abandonment of God in favor of a secular approach to everything in the world.

People throughout the world were abandoning the idea of what was right for what would provide them power and material wealth. They were abandoning their reliance on God in favor of reliance on earthly power and goods. With that in mind, Pope Pius XI established the Feast of Christ the King as a day for all people of his time and beyond to acknowledge God, in the person of Jesus Christ, as the absolute sovereign of the world and the entire universe.

So how are we supposed to relate to this “king”? In today’s gospel, we see a gruesome image of three men dying horrible deaths by crucifixion. The biblical account tells us that Jesus was flanked by two others, one on either side. Their dialogue tells us a great deal about the kingdom of God, especially about our gift of free will.

We each get to accept or reject Him. We each get to choose between good and evil. Unlike my friend, Saad or other royal subjects who don’t have a choice, in God’s kingdom we each get to choose to accept or reject the free gift of salvation that Jesus won for us on the cross.

In today’s Gospel, the first of the three crucified men to speak chooses to reject Christ and mocks him.

The gospel said he “reviled” Jesus. “Are you not the Christ?” he asks. “Save yourself and us.” In spite of the taunt, I can imagine Jesus thinking how He’d love to save this man. After all, He came to win salvation for everyone including him.

The man on the second cross is more sober and rebukes the first. “Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation?” He reminds him that they are both being crucified for actual crimes, and he adds, “This man has done nothing criminal.” And then he does something that is remarkable and reveals volumes about Christ our King.

He turns to the crucified Lord and asks for his forgiveness and mercy. Except in very limited circumstances, subjects of kings are not routinely permitted to submit their requests to the sovereign. But Jesus embraced the moment and showed us what kind of a king he is by granting the request of the dying man with the words, “Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

Much has changed in the world in the 91 years since Pope Pius XI established the Feast of Christ the King, and sadly much of what he saw is still with us.

Secularists continue to tell us that religious faith and worship should be rejected. Madison Avenue tells us that all of our dreams will come true and our lives will be fulfilled if we only buy the latest product they have to sell. Many consume far beyond their needs and amass fortunes that they could not possibly spend in several lifetimes, while others outside their doors are hungry and homeless.

With all of that brokenness in the world, why do we celebrate this feast of Christ the King? We celebrate to remind ourselves that there is redemption and hope for every one of us, regardless of circumstances or past failings. We celebrate to remind ourselves that God is truly the creator and author of all that is seen and unseen.

The Christ who forgives from the cross, is the Christ who is risen and has conquered death. And He is the Christ, the anointed one, who invites us to meet with him with wide arms open and a heart full of love. He is the God who provides for our every need, if we will only invite Him into our lives. He is the God who invites us into a deep, intimate personal friendship that transcends the relationship of sovereign and subject.

And that is the kind of king that all of us should be moved to worship and adore as Christ, the King!