

Royalty stoops: Matthew 25:31-46

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Not long before the onset of the cancer that finally killed him, King Hussein of Jordan undertook a small mission. He paid a personal visit to the families of some Israelis who had been killed in an Arab terrorist bombing. There was no talk of money or reparations; instead, the king quietly sat with the mourners and by his calm demeanor, unhurried manner and undivided attention was able to convey a sense of solidarity with them across the Arab-Israeli divide. The reaction of the relatives was out of proportion to the simplicity of the gesture. By all accounts, they were deeply moved by Hussein's expressions of personal involvement in their loss. Their grief had been acknowledged. More memorably still, it had been acknowledged and shared by a king.

The star of Diana, princess of Wales, has faded since her funeral—a funeral that was watched by 2 billion people. As we have learned more about her obsessions and failings, many have felt a little embarrassed about their initial reaction to her death. Among media people, there has been a lot of second-guessing about excessive coverage. Still, in all the hundreds of hours of television and the thousands of words written, I never heard anyone specifically identify the factor that I believe accounts for much of the extraordinary public outpouring. The various talking heads spoke of her beauty, accessibility, modernity, vulnerability, compassion and common touch—but no one identified the combination that made Diana exceptional.

Many famous people have engaged in charitable activities. Many have elicited near fanatical devotion because of their beauty, talent, personal chemistry, or skill in creating a media image—Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, Jacqueline Onassis and Eva Peron come to mind. None of these, however, were able to combine in one person what Diana did.

In the princess of Wales, majesty stooped. That was the key to her power. Even with his skills as empathizer-in-chief, President Clinton cannot convey what Diana or even Hussein could, because a president is not royalty. What Diana symbolized was this: she was seen as one who was willing to lay aside her princely prerogatives to be with those who are downtrodden.

It may seem to be trivializing Hussein, a man of great accomplishments, to mention him alongside the unformed and often frivolous Diana; indeed, the two are not really comparable. I bring them together here simply to show that in spite of our democratic instincts, the royal archetype is undimmed in the collective unconscious. It is no denigration of Hussein to observe that Diana, because she bore the aura of the British monarchy along with her own, was uniquely able to match her image as royal princess with a readiness to be with those who have no status in the world.

Many who saw the video of her visit to Angola would agree that Diana's ability to communicate her concern for the wretched of the earth took the breath away. I read the testimony of an American physician who had accompanied her on hospital rounds where there were no cameras. He said she did not hesitate to caress and linger beside patients with disfigurements and symptoms that were distressing even to medical personnel. That capacity, the doctor emphasized, cannot be faked. When it is offered generously and unstintingly by a beautiful young woman who is the embodiment of everyone's image of a fairy princess, the impact is astonishing.

Much of the grief for the princess was neurotic, like human behavior in general. My point has to do with the power of symbols. Diana was certainly an instinctive media genius. But she also knew how to use her immense candlepower for the good of the ordinary people. This is the right use of royalty.

These thoughts are meant to suggest that the feast day of Christ the King presents us with an extraordinary opportunity. We were speaking of archetypes; something greater than archetypes is here. We were speaking of the strength of symbolism; something stronger than symbolism is here. If it is true that there is unique power in the combination of royalty and stooping, then there has never been anything comparable to the errand of the Son of God. In Jesus Christ we see the one "who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be clutched at, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (Phil. 2:6).

The problem with much of our Christology nowadays is that we have concentrated so much on the stooping that we have lost sight of the royalty. More than half of the biblical message is thereby eliminated, for it is the combination that counts. Thus we read in Exodus 3, "Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Then the Lord said, 'I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them.'"

The God so terrible that we must hide our faces from his resplendence is the same God who has come down to deliver his people in their extremity. That is the secret. The Son who "sits upon his glorious throne with all the nations gathered before him" (Matt. 25:31-2) is the same one who, at the very apex of his cosmic power, reveals that the universe turns upon a cup of water given to the littlest ones in his name. An outpouring of the love of our hearts toward this king will therefore transcend the merely neurotic. Acts of mercy toward his little ones are vindicated already in the court of heaven, because they are taken up into the divine life of the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us.