

We do things a little bit differently over here in Christendom. For one: Christians get to hit the reset button an entire month early, because our new year begins on the first Sunday of Advent, which is next week. It's merely one of the many ways our faith pushes back against our culture to create a new story and a different way of life.

Some of you have heard one of my favorite stories; my kids can nearly recite it verbatim. It's called the fish story. Many years ago, I was visiting the Monterey Bay Aquarium, one of the most magnificent aquariums in the world, and in the aquarium, there's a giant cylindrical tank filled with anchovies. You stand in the middle and look up at the fish swimming in a circle above your head.

While I was standing there that day, watching hundreds of fish swim in a single direction, something caught my eye. One of the fish started swimming in the other direction. Then one more followed. And another, and another, until an entire subsection of fish was swimming upstream. There was a docent standing there with me, and he said that in his decades at the aquarium, he had never seen such a thing. "They always swim in the same direction," he said.

This story always makes me think of Jesus, and the ways in which he bucked the system, challenged the status quo, and created his own path in life. He surely didn't go unnoticed, but he didn't warm everyone's hearts and change everyone's minds, either.

This is perhaps most evident in today's gospel, when Jesus hangs on a cross for loving too deeply, for speaking too boldly, and for refusing to mindlessly accept the binaries and social morés. Even those sentenced to death on his left and on his right know that it is wrong that he should die, but their opinion doesn't matter.

Last week, on St. Martin's Day, we remembered Jesus' words about welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and imprisoned. If I were to encourage these from the pulpit in 2022, it might be seen as controversial or even viewed as radical propaganda. It wasn't all that different in Jesus' day.

And yet, in spite of that, one person followed Jesus. And then one more. And another, and another, until an entire subsection of humans was going against the grain. I imagine they were seeking a new way of life, a new way of love.

So now we find ourselves, at the very end of the Church year, celebrating something called Christ the King Sunday, and it all feels very odd. Jesus, the man who practiced humility and was critical of privilege, power, and the trappings of capitalism, a king?

We don't have many models of kings in modern culture, but one readily comes to mind: the parody of King George in the musical Hamilton. The character sings a rather fun ditty to those who have left England and gone across the pond, called You'll be Back:

You'll be back, soon you'll see  
You'll remember you belong to me  
You'll be back, time will tell  
You'll remember that I served you well  
Oceans rise, empires fall  
We have seen each other through it all  
And when push comes to shove  
I will send a fully armed battalion  
to remind you of my love!

Vindictive, manipulative, self-centered. A very different story from Jesus.

Jesus never set out to be a king of that ilk. Let us recall for a minute the Israelites, enslaved and exiled, bullied around by those with greater power than they.

When the Israelites heard and read the prophecies in Hebrew Scripture about God giving them a king, they likely formed images in their mind of what this king might look like. Many Israelites expected a mighty ruler who would have great power and strength. They hoped that this king would right all of the wrongs committed against them. Come, thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free.

Though Jesus was foretold to be a king, he was a new kind of king, one who ruled with love and equity. Christ the King Sunday first appeared about a century ago, in a time of great political and economic unrest. Sound familiar?

In the face of rising secularism and the emergence of fascist dictators, Pope Pius the Eleventh declared Christ the King a fixed feast on the liturgical calendar in 1925, offering up a different model of ruler.

Living in times of unrest, the idea of an all-powerful king can be comforting and hopeful. Whereas a kingdom is often unjust, with the powerful ruling over the lowly, Jesus demonstrated a new kingdom where resources are shared and all are treated with mutual respect and love.

Jesus reflects a different way, not an independent powerful leader, but an empowering inclusive leader who relies on each of us using our own gifts to end the unrest, to bring about justice and God's kingdom. Jesus protested in religious and civic space and faced police brutality not to replace the emperor with another but to illustrate a new way of living.

Jesus turned the world on its head. He taught and lived according to a *new* set of rules, one which saw every single person and living creature as beloved of God, as equally deserving, as fully alive. We need that now perhaps more than ever. And it goes beyond our own personal prayer life or attendance at Church, though those are important indeed. Yes, we start the new year a bit early. We sing songs about a newborn savior alongside Frosty the Snowman. Those are superficial markers, but our discipleship goes much deeper.

How radical is it to live into the things Jesus has invited us to today? To embody the gospel: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit those in prison. To change how we spend our money, whose voices we amplify, and what rights we fight for.

It's counter cultural.

It's swimming upstream.

But we're in good company if we decide to go against the grain and follow Christ the King and the way of love. We'll never be swimming alone.