

## **Christ the King 2016 (Baptism of Susanna)**

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The word Christ means “anointed one”. It is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word “Messiah”, and in the Old Testament, the one who is most frequently referred to as “anointed” is the one who rules over the people as King. The phrase “the Lord’s anointed”, used historically in English to refer to the monarch, is simply an Old Testament quotation. The one whom Yahweh, the god of Israel, has chosen to govern and guide his people, is the one we call both King and Messiah.

So in many ways the phrase “Christ the King”, which describes the feast we celebrate today, is a tautology. It’s noticeable, however, that the messiah of Jewish hope and expectation was not just any old King, he was to be a king after the manner of that greatest of Kings, David, the boy whom the Lord raised from guarding a literal flock as a shepherd boy, to being the shepherd of his people. It’s not just the Bible which uses this pastoral image. In the epics of Homer, we find kings referred to as shepherds. Of course they, and the kings of Israel, look very far from pastoral much of the time: on the contrary, desire for power, conquest and, above all, personal glory, seems to be the dominating influence. In the Hebrew scriptures, David and his successors most clearly fulfil the role

of the Lord's anointed when they are shepherding their people, not putting dominion, wealth or lust before the needs of those whom they are supposed to serve.

In today's baptism, it is Susanna who is the anointed one. This does not mean that she is the messiah, doubtless something of a relief to Michael and Sara. But it does mean that she shares in the life of Jesus Christ, the shepherd of his people, the King of all creation. Twice during the rituals of her baptism, Susanna will be anointed with holy oil. To begin with, she will be signed with the cross on her forehead with the oil of baptism. By this action, the church is claiming Susanna for Christ, identifying her as one of his people. This anointing reflects the kingship of Christ as the shepherd of his people, for by it Susanna is enfolded into the flock as one of the sheep for whom the good shepherd has laid down his life. And this anointing is done in the shape, the sign, of the cross. This symbol of Christian identity now belongs to Susanna, she shares in the kingdom of the crucified.

Most people think of baptism simply as an act which involves water. The earliest people to be baptised were, of course, adults, and the dramatic act of descending under water in order to be raised up is a very powerful symbol which the Christian church of the West has given up too easily.

Three times the water will be poured over Susanna's head, as she is baptised in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and as we symbolically drown her- for that is what we're doing - we are also, symbolically, and extraordinarily, placing her three times in the tomb of Christ. In the name of the Father - into the tomb with Christ on the Friday; and of the Son - into the tomb with Christ on the Saturday; and of the Holy Spirit - into the tomb again on the Sunday and then up, out from the death of human weakness into the life of God's perfect love.

When Susanna has received the waters of baptism she is then anointed again, this time with the oil of chrism, the sign by which the gift of the Holy Spirit is sealed within her as the beloved child of God, confirming her status as God's adopted child. By this anointing Susanna shares in the universal kingship of Christ, she is united in the Holy Spirit, by baptism, with the perfect love of Jesus Christ offered to the Father in the life of the Trinity and poured out for the world in the life death and resurrection of Christ our King. This Kingship is the glory of the one who is anointed, the one who is the Lord's messiah, but it is a Kingship very different from worldly expectation. Our gospel reading saw Jesus Christ enthroned as King not in earthly majesty but on the instrument of death which the Church proclaims as the symbol of her life, the cross from which Jesus proclaims forgiveness and love, and with them the defeat of death.

It is this Kingship into which Susanna is being baptised. Not the pomp and bombast of earthly monarchy, not the violent politics of worldly rule, but the Kingship of the anointed one, the self-giving love of the good shepherd who pastures his flock and leads them together in love. At the end of mass, Susanna will be given a candle, a candle which has been lit from the Paschal Candle, the pillar of fire which, at our Easter celebrations, proclaimed that not even death could place us beyond the kingship of the Lord's anointed, the one who is eternally the light of the world. As we rejoice in the Feast of Christ the King, we acknowledge the rule of the messiah over life and death itself, over all peoples and ages. This rule, this kingdom, is the divine life with which Susanna's human life is now to be transformed so that she may share in the reign of the one enthroned on the cross.