

“The Cosmic Christ”
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Feast of Christ the King – Year C
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Jer. 23:1-6, Ps. 46, Col. 1:11-20, Lk 23:33-43

There are a lot of ways to approach the Feast of Christ the King, which we celebrate today at the close of the liturgical year. Christ the King is unfortunately a name that points out the chauvinism and imperialism that are way too big a part of much Christian theology and praxis. But I’ll save that rant for another day and go in an entirely different direction this morning.

I watch a lot of science shows on PBS. I like learning about science on TV better than in books because the visuals really help me understand the concepts. I watch a lot of nature shows and shows about the cosmos. And I particularly like shows about the human body, this mysterious organism I’m part of.

A while back I watched a series on the human brain that totally blew my mind. It showed how incredibly plastic our brains are and the huge capacity for healing, or at least compensation, that comes with that. It explored how making meaning of the world is so central to our brains’ purpose and functioning, as well as to our humanity.

My favorite illustration of this was a paralyzed woman who controlled a robotic arm she was connected to only through electrodes hooked up to her brain. She could move the arm just with her thoughts. The scientists predicted she would eventually be able to control the robotic arm by largely unconscious intention, much the way we all control the movement of our own arms and legs.

And here’s the real shocker. Not only could she move the robotic arm and hand with her thoughts, when she grasped the hand of another person with it, she experienced the “warmth of human touch.” She experienced human touch and the emotions and meaning that come with it in a way she hadn’t since becoming paralyzed 10 years previously – even though the sense of touch only came to her through her brain.

Amazing! Consciousness, intention, and desire really are what make us human. And it’s all about relationship. The relationships between the parts within our skin, and the relationships among parts beyond that very permeable boundary.

The profound effects of relationship appear to manifest in all manner of things, down to the tiniest particles. The Nobel Prize for Physics was won just this fall by a trio of scientists whose work involves quantum entanglement. Quantum entanglement is a curious, or as Einstein once said, “spooky” phenomenon where two particles are connected in such a way that what happens to one particle has an instantaneous effect on the other. This is true no matter how great the distance between them. They can be across the universe from one another and still be intimately, even causally related. How weird is that?!

While I appreciate that one can never prove theological tenets scientifically, I wonder if this phenomenon of quantum entanglement that occurs throughout tiny bits of the universe all the time might be the unseen reality that some of us call the providence of God.

It is certainly a phenomenon that describes the inter-connectedness of all things and the power of relationship. Perhaps quantum entanglement could be used to describe the relationship of Jesus's full humanity interacting with his full divinity. Or the interpenetrating relationship of the Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit, three distinct persons in the Oneness who is God. Or maybe it's somehow related to what's happening when people experience the mystical reality described by Paul with the words, "It is not I, but Christ who lives in me."

Albert Einstein once said, "A human being is part of the whole called by us 'the universe,' a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical illusion of his consciousness. The striving to free oneself from this delusion is the one issue of true religion...and the way to reach any attainable measure of peace of mind."

Speaking of peace of mind, this week I've been participating in the free online Global Joy Summit, put on to showcase a 2021 documentary with and about the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu called "Mission: Joy – Finding Happiness in Troubled Times." Bishop Michael Curry gave a talk during the summit, along with the Dalai Lama and other Buddhist monks, psychologists and brain scientists. I think you can see the recorded sessions for free online for another day or so.

The Summit also offered daily practices focused on cultivating joy within. And wouldn't you know it, they all had to do with the flexibility of our minds and with how we relate to other people and the world around us. Relationships, relationships relationships.

Both spiritual teachers and scientists pointed out that altruism and compassion toward others – whether attitudes of the heart or neuropathways in the brain – are the surest route to experiencing joy. As the Dalai Lama likes to say, with his impish smile – "interest in others is very much in your own self-interest."

By this time, you're probably wondering what all this has to do with the Feast of Christ the King. Interestingly, when the current version of this holy day was instituted about a hundred years ago by one pope or another, it was officially called the Solemnity of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe.

Much more than a day to celebrate Christ as head of the church or ruler of the nations, it is an invitation to celebrate the meaning of the Christ-happening as the creative impetus, transformative process, and ultimate fulfillment of the universe itself. Today, this reality is often called the Cosmic Christ. Or the Universal Christ; a reality definitely not owned by Christians.

One thing we western Christians of the 21st century need to get our minds around is that Christ is not Jesus's last name. Nor is it merely the royal anointing his earliest followers gave him. And it definitely is not primarily an ecclesial title.

Christ is the word used to describe the dynamic purpose and meaning of the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. This Christ-purpose and meaning permeates all time and all creation. As Paul puts it in his letter to the Colossians: "Christ is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation. . . . all things have been created through him and for him."

The incarnation of God took human form in Jesus some 2000 years ago, but the initial material incarnation of God occurred in what we commonly call the Big Bang about 14 billion years ago. The Big Bang is one descriptor for the moment God revealed the divine mystery through physical form. God's self-revelation through light and atmosphere, stars and planets, water and land, plants and animals. And us.

Franciscan theologian and neuroscientist Ilia Delio points out that every act of physical death is an act of new life in the universe. And, she says, the resurrection of Christ reiterates and summarizes the whole evolutionary, emergent creation as a movement toward something new.

Delio goes on to say something I can really grasp only through intuition. She says, "The resurrection of Jesus undergirds the fact that life creates the universe, not the other way around." Again, "the resurrection of Jesus undergirds the fact that life creates the universe, not the other way around."

And she goes on: "What takes place in Christ is intended for the whole cosmos -- union and transformation in the divine embrace of love!"

What a joyful promise we live inside of! And hopefully live into! A truly glorious quantum and cosmic entanglement! Come, Christ Jesus, come!

In the meantime, celebrating the Feast of the Cosmic Christ reminds me that creation is the original holy scripture that reveals God to humanity. Our own Bible says as much in several places. If this is true, that creation is the first revelation of God, we must come to terms with the sad reality that how we're living on this earth largely contradicts our professed love for God. Every day brings more evidence showing how far we've pushed the planet's physical systems, particularly those of us enjoying a first world lifestyle.

On this Feast of Christ, Ruler of the Universe, we celebrate the embodiment of God in Jesus and in all creation. As part of our celebration, let us be mindful that the ecological crisis we're in today is more than a scientific fact or political quandary. It is God's plea for us to imitate Christ in making the kinds of self-sacrifice that bring life out of death. How we relate to the universe beyond our own skin and kin is a crucial part of the puzzle of God's creation through the eternal, relational Christ.

As we decide what small, personal actions we can take to help slow climate change, or how we might become effective public advocates for sustainable living, we must remember

that how we treat the earth is part and parcel of how we love God, our neighbors, and ourselves.

And yet, when we miss the mark, as we so often do, God forgives us. The truth is we still really don't know what we're doing most of the time. Come, Christ Jesus, Ruler of the Universe! Show us the Way!

I'd like to close today with a prayer meant to help us experience the loving interconnectedness of everything. I invite you to join me, if you'd like, in this abbreviated, somewhat modified version of the Buddhist prayer of lovingkindness.

Take a moment to stretch and get comfortable in your chair. You might close your eyes, if it feels right, or just let them de-focus. Take a couple of deep, cleansing breaths.

Now, let yourself imagine one or a few people who you know love you fully come and surround you. They can be living or dead; and you may want to include the Christ among them. Feel their presence there with you, loving you deeply.

And now, feeling this love, repeat these words to yourself:

May I be well and happy.

May I be safe and at peace.

May I be filled with lovingkindness.

When you're ready, invite a person or persons, or a situation, that you find troubling to come before you. Just breathe and feel their presence with you for a moment.

And then, repeat these words to them silently:

May you be well and happy.

May you be safe and at peace.

May you be filled with lovingkindness.

And now, bring into your awareness all beings on our planet and in the cosmos, as well as the earth itself and cosmos. Breathe into this awareness of all that is, surrounding you.

And again, repeat these words silently:

May you be well and happy.

May you be safe and at peace.

May you be filled with lovingkindness.

Amen.