This is the season not quite of nativity plays, but certainly the season for the rehearsals for all those nativity plays that will be performed up and down the country in church and school halls. As a 10-year-old in a Church of England Primary school I was selected by the teacher to play what I was told was a starring role – as Joseph. I hated being Joseph: on stage most of the time, crowded out by younger kids in moth-eaten sheepskins and a kind of pantomime cow, I seemed to have lots of lines to learn and stood shivering most of the time in a thin towelling robe that barely covered my knees. I hated being Joseph. I wanted to be one of the three kings. Now they had costumes! And the class spent endless amounts of craft-time making their elaborate crowns, bejewelled boxes and gluing fruit pastels onto gold sprayed plastic goblets. I had someone’s grandad’s walking stick, an old tea-towel on my head and bare feet. I scowled on stage, equally resentful that I’d not been given the part of the arch-angel who wore huge wire wings threaded with curled coloured paper. But Joseph was hardly distinguishable from a clutter of miserable looking shepherds, also in towelling robes and tea-towels. Kings and angels had a bit of glamour about them, were considerably more warmly dressed, and carried glitzy gifts. There was only one figure down from Joseph, and that was the fat and waxy looking baby Jesus, who only had a nappy, and a hole in his mouth where a dummy should have been.

Kings, emperors, Tsars and Caesars of fabled wealth and sovereign powers – these had something going for them. These were people of importance.

And so, at an early age, and well before I had heard of Karl Marx, I learned there was a class system and that I belonged to the lower orders: the ruled, not the rulers. There were a lot of us at this lowly level, but that didn’t make being down here any better. It fuelled an ongoing sense of injustice. We looked with awe and envy at the rich robed monarchs with their fake fur collars. Swapping cloaks made from damask table cloths and discarded curtains for Armani suits and designer sunglasses, most of us still remain out of their
league. There are the rulers and there are the ruled; whatever democracy tries to tell us. Then along comes Jesus.

Our Scripture readings on this Sunday, set apart by the church for Christ the King, present us with a riddle that goes to the very heart of Christianity. In the *Book of Daniel* as again in the *Book of Revelation* we’re presented with the fabulous: a David Bowie Son of Man with flame-coloured hair descending from on high in clouds of dry-ice and incense; the Alpha and Omega dazzling in his white, diamanté robes; thronged like any pop idol by worshipful dancers who bask in his presence and accentuate his importance. And then in the *Gospel of St. John* we are presented with a whipped and beaten-up convict destined to be strung up naked and crucified. “‘King’ is your word,” the peasant replies, to Pilate’s sardonic question about his kingdom. Nowhere in the gospels does Jesus claim the title of king, and even here, before Pilate, Jesus will speak of a kingdom but not of his kingship. ‘King’ is a title we have given him: Christ the king. It’s not a title he ever uses himself.

The title has Scriptural support, going back to David. But before David there’s a dispute in the Hebrew Bible about kingship, and the translators of what we call the King James bible were aware of this. King James, of course, wrote at length of his divine kingship: the king as the icon basileus, the image of the image of God in Christ. He didn’t quite view himself as God’s vice-regent on earth, but he, like his later French counterpart Louis XIV, saw his royalty as bestowed by divine power and possessing divine power – the power to heal, for example. But the translators of the King James bible were all too aware that God never wanted to give Israel a king. When Israel lamented their lack of a despotic ruler, they were told they should have no king but God, the Lord of all. In God’s eyes, as God tells the prophet Samuel, earthly kings were all tyrants wielders of a sovereignty far too earthly and far too human who enslaved their people. Earthly kings were disasters in the making. But Samuel was forced by the people to anoint someone to rule over them – because neighbouring nations all had such persons. And God allowed Samuel to make Israel a king. And if Saul, their first king, began well he ended badly. “‘King’ is your word,” the peasant who surrenders himself to being crucified replies.

It is not that Christ is not sovereign. He is God so He is the alpha and omega. The depictions of him as the exalted Son of God in the *Book of Daniel* and the *Book of Revelation* are true. But here’s the riddle: the king is also the crucified one, the sacrificed one, the one despised and rejected, the one born in humble, lowly conditions (like the
majority of us). He is not the Hasmonaean prince, that’s Herod; he’s the migrant preacher who calls the fishermen, tax-collectors and political insurgents to also become migrant preachers. And we will never recognise him as the exalted one without identifying with him as the one who is abased; the one who came to serve. It is one of the paradoxes that the *Gospel of St. John* continually reminds us of: Jesus Christ is the one who is lifted up, lifted high, but only in and as the crucified one. His is a different sovereignty and power; the power to love infinitely and eternally. And we who are followers and imitators of Christ will fare no better than He – even if we are kings and queens. When I look at our monarch I see someone whose life is given over to service for all her diamond tiaras and golden trains.

So maybe being Joseph wasn’t so bad after all. It taught me my place in the divine and the secular order of things. And it was much better than being Mary who had her hair singed by one of the lesser angels carrying a candle. And I didn’t have to suffer the indignity of having my head stuck between another boy’s legs as the back half of the pantomime cow.