

Leadership, Ennoblement, and Why We Still Love Monarchies

There is an old idea in the Judeo-Christian tradition that humans were given dominion over the earth to rule in the image of God. It's a remarkable idea, made more remarkable by the fact that such dominion appears to be shared by *all* humans.

Later writers in the same tradition developed that idea further into the more concrete idea that humans were (ideally) kings and queens of creation.

On its face, the idea seems impossible: how can *everyone* be a king or queen? The answer lies in questioning our assumptions about leadership.

We tend to view leadership in a hierarchical way, with leaders and followers. But our actual experience of good leadership is different. We tend to notice quickly when a leader is keeping the people around them down. The best leaders we see are surrounded by competent, able, confident, and free people – not servants. Good leadership does not keep people down – it pulls them up.

I have a theory that this is one of the reasons many of us have fond feelings about the still-remaining monarchies in the world. These monarchs have little except symbolic power. But when we see a prince or a queen or a king interact with the “common folk,” we are experiencing the phenomenon of “ennoblement.” Maybe it's the English princess talking familiarly with a small schoolboy, the prince of Liechtenstein shaking the hands of a group of railway workers, or the fictional King Aragorn bowing to the hobbits.

In these acts of “ennoblement,” the perceived (if imaginary) greatness of the noble flows out to the people, making them more noble in the process. We all experience that transfusion of nobility *en masse* when we see an event like a royal wedding or funeral. Sure, it may just all be in our minds, but the practical effect is that we stand up straighter, act better, and aim higher after these interactions. In other words, we become more like kings and queens ourselves.

That's how good leadership is supposed to work. “Ennoblement” looks different for everyday leaders, but it serves the same purpose. It does not lord over others – it turns them into lords.

It's quite possible to live in a world populated only by kings and queens. There are far more

than enough things which require our dominion – and little good excuse to exercise dominion over people. Good leaders are really only required when people fail to be leaders themselves. The job of a good leader is done when their followers realize that they, too, are leaders.

A good rule of thumb: if you find it necessary to lead someone forever, you are not a good leader. Ennoble the people following you, then move on.

Intellectual Credit: Jocko Willink and his work around the idea of “decentralized command” has been quite influential, as well as the idea of servant leadership echoed throughout most great writing on leadership. N.T. Wright and Lisa Sharon Harper have both done work on the Christian idea of dominion/kingship which has affected my thinking.