

Feast of Christ the King November 20, 2016 (34th and last Sunday of the Year)

2 Samuel 5:1-3; Colossians 1:12-20; Luke 23:35-43

On the last Sunday of the liturgical year the church celebrates the Feast of Christ the King. This feast was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 and is observed on this Sunday as it helps us to meditate on Christ the King and Lord and at the same time reflect on the Second and Final Coming of Christ, the last Judgment, and the end of the world. The Solemnity of Christ the King is a newer feast in the Catholic Church. The pontiff was witness to a turbulent time in the world's history. The First World War had just come to an end. Secularism was on the rise and dangerous dictatorships were emerging in Europe and beyond. Christ had long been referred to as King, but Pope could see the respect and reverence for Christ's authority waning in the midst of the unrest during the first part of the 20th century. In response, the feast was set with the intent to reaffirm and refocus faith and respect in the kingship of Jesus. Pope Pius XI felt that nations would see that the Church has the right to freedom, and immunity from the state. Secondly that leaders and nations would see that they are bound to give respect to Christ. Finally that the faithful would gain strength and courage from the celebration of the feast, as we are reminded that Christ must reign in our hearts, minds, wills, and bodies. From the dawn of civilization, kings have arisen who have dreamed of possessing a world-wide dominion, a universal kingdom that would last forever. But here we have a king who is remarkably different from the kings of the earth. He came to serve all, even His enemies. He was a king, the God man, with a vulnerable human nature and at the same time a person all powerful. To all intents and purposes, Christ, on the cross, was the perfect picture of defeat. His enemies derided and mocked Him; his companions, with the exception of John and a few women, had abandoned Him. It remained for one of the thieves crucified with Him to recognise Christ for what He was a King and he asks for a place in his kingdom and receives it. In the Gospel of today Jesus demonstrates how he is messiah and king by granting salvation to a believing criminal merely for the asking. In the first reading we heard how David became the leader of his people. But he recognises that God alone is the true King of Israel. In the second reading we have a marvellous picture of Christ. The incarnation was in God's mind from all eternity and Jesus is the greatest possible revelation of God's love and mercy.

Many in today's democratic set up will discover that the title "King" does not register too well. Hence they feel that a better image of today's Feast is achieved

by presenting it as the Feast of Christ the Leader. Leadership is the theme of the feast day Mass, as we have seen in the different readings and it is an important theme for us, as Christians, to consider. All of us some time or other would like to think of ourselves as leaders. If we listen to the average conversation and we find that there is little done by others that we could have done better. Jesus certainly knew the oppressive nature of secular kings and in contrast to them he connected his role as king to humble service, and commanded his followers to be servants as well. In other passages of Scripture, his kingdom is tied to his suffering and death. While Christ is coming to judge the nations, his teachings spell out a kingdom of justice and judgment balanced with radical love, mercy, peace, and forgiveness. When we celebrate Christ as King, we are not celebrating an oppressive ruler, but one willing to die for humanity and whose loving-kindness endures forever.

In fact, there are two highly contrasting pictures of Jesus as King given in the readings today. There is the highly triumphant picture given in the Second Reading from the letter to the Colossians. Paul tells the Colossians how grateful they ought to be to God for having made them Christians and citizens of Christ's Kingdom. He then goes on to describe what Christ is to them as he is to us. Jesus is the image of the unseen God and the first-born of all creation, for in him were created all things. God wanted all perfection to be found in him, and all things to be reconciled through him when he made peace by his death on the cross. He has prepared all for the everlasting kingdom of happiness. Here Paul thanks the Father for what he has done to us in Christ. We already have the deep experience of Jesus by the forgiveness of sins and membership in the church. In the central verses of this passage, Paul gives us a magnificent picture of Jesus: he is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation. In these and subsequent verses, he indicates that the incarnation was in God's mind from all eternity.

The institution of the feast of the Kingship of Christ was intended to be a rallying call to all Christians to acknowledge the Sovereignty of Christ not only over Christians but also on all creation. In the first reading we have David anointed king of Israel by Samuel the Prophet. But Saul, though side lined by God already, refuses to step aside. This led to a prolonged struggle between them and finally ends when Paul took his own life in a battle with the Philistines. With Saul dead, all the tribes come to David in Hebron. God now sends David to Hebron and there he draws his inspiration from the glory days of Israel's origins. The tribes of Israel express their own conviction that David's appointment as King comes from God. David makes an agreement with them before God, thus invoking Divine blessings on his reign. Those tribes once loyal to Saul accept this divine appointment of

David and affirm that he is the Shepherd of Israel. Shepherd was a traditional title for a king and in Israel it was also a title for God. Thus at this point of his life, David was their shepherd on behalf of Yahweh and the king was called upon to rely on God.

In the Gospel we are given a very different picture indeed. Twice in the passage, Jesus is referred to as the King of the Jews. Two other times he is called the Messiah. All these references are directed to Jesus as he hung on the cross and they are all made in mockery of him. Here we are presented with a man being executed in shame and ignominy, bleeding and battered on a cross, one of the cruellest and degrading punishments ever devised. Over his head are the mocking words: "This is the King of the Jews." To every human imagination he does not look like a king. People are watching him die on the cross, as the leaders, soldiers and people too consider him a fraud and a failure. The test they are using is the challenge that if he is truly the king and messiah why he does not save himself and come down the cross. This indeed is the challenge before him of an earthly king like Caesar and a spiritual king like Jesus. Certainly we prefer those triumphant pictures where Jesus wears a crown and an expensively embroidered cloak with a sceptre in his hand as he looks down benignly on his subjects. The Church has chosen quite a different picture for today's feast. It is to help us wake up out of our complacency and to become more aware of how Jesus came to be our King and what he expects from his subjects. The kingdom of God is about service, sacrifice and love.

Even while he is dying on the cross, Jesus reaches out to sinners with the gift of Salvation. This comes as one of the two criminals being crucified along with Jesus asks to be remembered when Jesus comes into his kingdom. Jesus grants him the salvation. The other criminal however, shows no sign of faith and continues the mockery of others. What this criminal and others fail to understand the divine necessity of Jesus' death. They do not realise that what he is really doing by dying on the cross is bringing about salvation for those who cannot save themselves. The passage clearly tells us that in spite of the mockery and insult, Jesus is truly the king and Saviour. The titles they gave him are true and accurate. Jesus redefines the true meaning of Kingship and the notion of the kingdom. This is not a competition of royalty but an expression of leadership that culminates in service. He shuns the status of power and might, domination and force as the moral and practical foundation for life. Jesus is truly the master and king.

The feast of Christ the King celebrates the fact that there is one who is remarkably different. He came to serve all and his kingdom is divine. In several passages of Scripture, his kingdom is tied to his suffering and death. While Christ is coming to judge the nations, his teachings spell out a kingdom of justice and judgment balanced with radical love, mercy, peace, and forgiveness. The Scriptures speak of Jesus as God and also as King. He was born in the royal Davidic family. Joseph and Jesus were not biological father and son, but legal father and son, and, therefore, the throne of David belonged legally to Jesus. In the annunciation narrative we have the angel Gabriel bringing the good news to Mary in Nazareth, saying, "He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." When the Magi come to Jerusalem they ask "Where is the one born king of the Jews?" The priests inform them that he is born in Bethlehem. We find another reference to the kingship of Jesus Christ in Matthew during his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Here people call him son of David and greet him as a king. Later during his passion when Jesus is placed before Pilate, he is asked the question 'are you the king of the Jews?' 'Yes, it is as you say,' Jesus replies." Finally before his Ascension Jesus tells his disciples: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.'" He is the king of the universe, ruling over all.

During his life Jesus preached the Kingdom of God and openly told the disciples to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. It means we must put God first in our lives. It means we must come under the rule of this God/King, Jesus Christ. It means we must confess with our mouths, Jesus is Lord, and does what he says. He alone is King of kings and Lord of Lords. He called his disciples not servants, but friends, and bestowing on them a share in His priesthood and kingship. Though he died, like other kings, he died willingly to save His people, and His death was not a result of a battle lost or a plan gone awry, but of a glorious victory planned before the world began. He rose in glory, and went to his heavenly coronation. Jesus knew perfectly well the oppressive nature of secular kings, and in contrast to them, he connected his role as king to humble service, and commanded his followers to be servants as well. Christ is the king that gives us true freedom, freedom in Him. Thus we must never forget that Christ radically redefined and transformed the concept of kingship. Christ Himself speaks of His own kingly authority in His last discourse, as he explains the rewards and punishments that will be the eternal lot of the just and the damned. After His resurrection, when giving to His Apostles the mission of teaching and baptizing all nations, He took the opportunity to call Himself king, confirming the title publicly, and solemnly proclaimed that all power was given Him in Heaven and on earth.

Today we are honouring Jesus the King who humbled himself in order to raise us up to the status of the Sons of God, a king who suffered the cruellest of deaths so that we could have an unending life of happiness when we leave this earth. Jesus said: "The kingdom of God is in the midst of you." (Luke. 17:21). This is the spiritual aspect of the Kingdom of God, which is much more important than its exterior and corporeal aspect. For, if the Jews, who acclaimed Jesus the King during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, had had the kingdom of God in them, then, without any doubt, with the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit, they would have proclaimed their faith in Jesus the King of the Jews five days later, at the foot of the Cross of Calvary! But the day will come when the Jews will convert and recognize Jesus as their Messiah and their King. Then, with all the Church, they will be able to acclaim Jesus the King of the Jews and the King of the Universe, as if they had been there, at the foot of the Cross of Calvary. Today we renew our loyalty to him, Jesus our King. We are privileged to be his subjects and more so his own chosen ones. If we are with him we have the peace and happiness in and through him.

Reflecting on this feast Pope Benedict XVI said: We know from the Gospels that Jesus refused the title of king when this was intended in a political sense, along the lines of the "kings of the nations". Instead, during his passion, he took upon himself a singular regality before Pilate and declared that his kingdom is not of this world. The Father entrusted to his Son the mission of giving eternal life to man, loving him even unto the supreme sacrifice, and at the same time conferring on him the power of judgment, from the moment he became Son of man, like us in every way. The Gospel insists upon the universal royalty of Christ the Judge, with the magnificent parable of the final judgment. The images are simple, the language is common, but the message is extremely important: it is the truth on our ultimate destiny and on the criteria with which we will be valued. In effect, the reign of Christ is not of this world, but brings to completion all the good that, thanks be to God, exists in man and in history. If we put into practice our love for our neighbour, according to the Gospel message, we then pave the way for the lordship of God, and his kingdom is realized by means of us.

The Church year ends awaiting the return of Christ, when evil will be defeated and Jesus will begin his reign as King of kings. Christ's kingdom begins in the community of people who live in a new and different way because of God's presence in their lives. Celebrating Christ's kingship gives us an opportunity to proclaim the good news that his second coming brings joy rather than fear, hope rather than despair. We are cleansed and renewed and brought closer to our God.

Today's feast is both a challenge and an opportunity for us to become aware of our call to become truly both subjects and partners of Jesus our King. Long live the King! May his Kingdom come!

There was once a wise woman travelling in the mountains who found a precious stone in a stream. The next day she met another traveller who was hungry, and she opened her bag to share her food. The hungry traveller saw the precious stone and asked if she might give it to him. She did so without hesitation. The traveller left, rejoicing in his good fortune. He knew the stone was worth enough to give him security for a lifetime. However he could not sleep a minute thinking someone would steal it and he was in constant fear all day long. So a few days later he came back to return the stone to the woman who had given it to him. 'I've been thinking,' he said, 'I know how valuable the stone is, but I'm giving it back in the hope that you can give me something much more precious. I want you to give me what you have within you that enabled you to give me the stone.' 'The more you share... The more you grow...'

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