

The Solemnity of Christ the King “What Does Kingship Look Like?”

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At the end of every liturgical year we celebrate the Solemnity of Christ the King. What is this feast day saying? It says that every liturgical celebration we had from last Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, all the Sundays of Ordinary Time, and all the special feast days and memorials along the way point to one truth: Jesus Christ is our Lord, he is our God, and he is King of the Universe. He is everything Saint Paul is writing about in our second reading. “[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things were created through him and for him.”

What does this objectively mean? It means: if we think Jesus was just one great person among many, we would be wrong. If we think Jesus was a great philosopher among many, we would be wrong. If we think Christianity is just one nice belief among many, St. Paul says we would be wrong. Jesus is the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega and every letter in between. Jesus is God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father, through him all things were made. All fullness resides in Christ. Christ is the King of Kings.

And so, what does this king look like you might ask? Let’s turn now to our Gospel reading. Our Gospel reading says this king looks like a man around thirty, bloodied and abused, dying a humiliating death on an instrument of torture. That is your king. That is your God. The juxtaposition of our second reading from St. Paul and the Gospel reading from St. Luke is quite jarring, to say the least. It almost feels like a cruel joke. What are we to make of it?

My take is this solemnity is challenging us to understand kingship in a radically different way than what we are used to. I mean, what do we think of when we use the word king? We think of a king as having power over others, right? That is what we think of governors and presidents as well, as people with power over others. This is certainly the definition that the soldiers were using when they said with much sarcasm, “If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!” What they are saying is, if you are a king, you should be able to save yourself better than anyone. This is the definition of king the rulers were also using when they sneered at Jesus saying, “He saved others, let him save himself!” Even one of the criminals there reviled Jesus saying, “Are you not the Christ, save yourself”. They were all working from the same definition of king that we might use in our culture today. If I have all the power or money in the world, I should be able to save myself better than anyone right?

The irony is: the true king revealed to us by God through Sacred Scripture is not the one who saves himself, but rather the one who forgets himself in love for others. The true king is not the one who inflates his ego and sense of self-importance, but rather considers other peoples’ lives as more important than his own. The true king is not the one who fills himself up with the praises of others but rather empties himself out in altruistic love of the world, making peace by the blood of his cross. That is our king.

To underscore all of this, one of the most powerful moments in the entire bible is in today's Gospel reading. The good thief next to Jesus didn't get a lot of things right during his lifetime, and he knew that. He said he deserved to be punished like he was. He admitted this. How often do we feel that way? How often do we feel like we deserve to be punished for our flaws? The good thief doesn't even feel worthy enough to ask for forgiveness. I find that piece of this Gospel the most interesting piece of all. He doesn't even feel worthy of asking for forgiveness. All he asks of Jesus is to be simply remembered when Jesus enters into his Kingdom. He gets more than he bargained for, doesn't he? Jesus looks at him, sees his heart, and says, "Amen I say to you, this day you will be with me in paradise." That is how Jesus celebrates his kingship, not by saving himself, but rather by saving another.

What does this mean for us today? When it comes to having power or prestige, I think the Gospel says something radically different than what we have been fed over and over in our culture. Having power in our culture is usually about how much money we make, how much influence we have, and how well we can serve ourselves. The Gospel says something radically different. The Gospel says, if you want to have true power in your life, stop trying to save yourself. Start wanting to save other people instead. The Gospel says, stop trying to serve yourself. Serve other people instead. An invitation could be, consider what this might mean with regard to how we treat our family members, especially as we get closer to the holidays? Consider what this might mean in how I treat my co-workers or classmates at school. How about as a faithful citizen in our country today? What does this look like in how I think about those who are on the peripheries of our society and the most vulnerable? You see, my friends, every liturgical season, feast day and memorial this past year all point to Jesus who gave himself completely to us instead of serving himself. What this means is, when we reach out in love and service to another, we participate in the power that created the universe as baptized followers of Christ the King.