

OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, KING OF THE UNIVERSE

Gospel: Luke 23:35-43

The people stood by the cross of Jesus, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

REFLECTION 1:

KING JESUS

Certain feasts of the Church's year were instituted for political as well as spiritual motives and today's feast of Christ the King is one of them. On December 11th 1925, Pope Pius XI issued his encyclical letter 'Quash Primus' meaning from the Latin 'Of Great Importance'. This letter officially founded the Feast of Christ the King on the last Sunday of October. It was as a response to what the pope described as the 'destructive forces of our age'. Among these destructive forces of the time would have been the Communist takeover of Russia in 1917, the Fascist rise to power under Mussolini in Italy in 1924 and Hitler's establishment of the Nazi party in 1925. In introducing the new feast, Pius XI declared; 'Documents are read by only a few learned people, whereas feasts move and teach the faithful'. No doubt the Holy Father was hoping that with the introduction of the feast, forces would not sway the faithful contrary to their faith, such as 'secularism, atheism and materialism'.

As a result of the reforms of Vatican 2, the feast of Christ the King was transferred to the last Sunday of the Church's year where it acquired a more spiritual setting as is clear from today's readings. The strange thing is that the reign of Christ, as our King, which transcends space and time, did not begin when he was born or even when he achieved his prime. Rather the reign of our King began at the end of his life, in the hour of his dying.

Up until the 13th century, the cross as the symbol of our salvation was fashioned not with a body but with jewels. Precious gems spoke to the faithful of the victory Jesus had achieved over sin and death and of his reign as King of heaven and earth that had been established on the unlikely throne of the gibbet. Although crucifixes have been styled more realistically since then, due to the initiative of Francis of Assisi, the notion of Jesus' triumphant kingship has not been lost. By their portrayals of Jesus' passion and crucifixion, the evangelist, especially Luke and John, underscored the fact that Jesus went to his death, not as a defeated victim but as a victorious crown prince, the culminating scenario of a well-planned love story (Luke 23: 35-43).

By means of the three-fold taunt or mockery that makes up the heart of the Lucan crucifixion scene and the first portion of today's Gospel, Luke highlighted the saving power of Jesus on the cross. Mocked, rejected, scourged, and left to die on a gibbet, Jesus showed the power of his dominion. The thorns

crushed harshly on his head and the sign at the top of the cross proclaimed that Jesus had indeed begun his reign, 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'.

As the shepherd King, he tends to the weak, seeks out the lost, bandages the wounded and leads those who have strayed to his everlasting kingdom. As the Preface for today's Mass puts it, 'as King, Jesus claims dominion over all creation . . . an eternal and universal kingdom. Of truth and life, justice, love and peace'.

REFLECTION 2:

KING OF HEARTS

There's a story told about a king - a young king who loved his people and did his best to make them happy. A day came when his country was in great danger from a terrible enemy. The king, who might have stayed in his palace, went with his army to the war. He shared all the hardships of the soldiers and they loved him. When the great battle came, the king was in the thick of the fighting and at the climax of the conflict; the king fell, covered with wounds. It was at that very moment that the tide turned, and victory was won. Somehow the king lived, and when he came back home, leading his victorious soldiers, the cheering crowds erupted in shouts of joy, especially when they saw the scars of his wounds. Their love for him from that day onwards knew no bounds.

Jesus Christ is our King and he has won the battle for our salvation on the timbers of the cross of Calvary and today is his feast. On December 11th, 1925, Pope Pius XI issued his encyclical letter 'Quas Primas' (from the Latin meaning 'Of great importance'). This letter officially founded the Feast of Christ the King of the last Sunday of the Liturgical Year, as a weapon, against what the pope described as the 'destructive forces of our age'. Among the destructive forces of that time would have been the Communist takeover in Russia in 1917, the Fascist rise to power in Italy under Mussolini in 1924 and Hitler's establishment of the Nazi Party in 1925. The Holy Father was praying that with the introduction of the feast, the faithful would 'not be swayed by forces contrary to their faith, such as secularism, atheism and materialism'. The same could have been written by Pope Francis for our times.

I'm sure you were struck by the contrast in between the First Reading today, the triumphant anointing of David as king and the anointing of Christ on the cross 'by his baptism'. Jesus referred to his death as a baptism. 'There is a baptism I must still receive and how great is my distress until it is over'. Indeed, there were times in the life of Jesus when the crowds would have made him king - yearning as it were for the golden age of King David to return. But Jesus only accepted the title of King on the Cross, where he turns the world's ideas upside down; 'my kingdom is not of this world', he would say to Pilate to his question, are you a king?'

Jesus kingship is altogether unique; he spoke of it as being 'within'. Starting out on his mission in Galilee, he spoke of 'The kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the good news'. His kingdom is precisely where the Gospel message meets with a willing response. It is in the heart of each one of us where truth resides and a love of justice and peace reigns. This kingdom springs from Jesus and invade areas where the spirit of the Gospel breathes freely. It wins over a dying burglar on an adjoining cross with the promise of a heavenly abode. His is also the kind of kingdom that reigns in the heart of a home where a young couple, struggling with a mortgage do their best to care for their children - also, in the hearts of grandparents, anxious for their children and grandchildren. All these and countless more, rich and poor, young and old, wise and foolish, who find their hope in their allegiance to Jesus Christ.