

OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, KING OF THE UNIVERSE

Gospel: John 18:33-37

Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate replied, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Whoever belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

REFLECTION 1: KING OF THE WAY, TRUTH AND LIFE

'Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews' – this was the official title of condemnation that Pilate had fixed to the cross of Calvary. This was the verdict the Roman Governor had come to at the end of the cross-examination of Jesus; the kernel of today's Gospel (John: 18: 33-37). This interrogation took place after Jesus had entered the Pretoria with the crown of thorns matted on his head. Here the accused acts more like a judge and Jesus really dominates the exchange. Then of course he knew in advance and had chosen this way of death and realised its significance.

During his public life, Jesus never attributes to himself the title of king. His usual reference to himself was the **Son of Man**. In fact, Jesus as king would have created huge problems not only during his earthly ministry but also during the period 70-95 AD when the Gospels were being written. In Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospels when Pilate asks, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' Jesus always answers, 'You, say so!' that can only be interpreted as a negative response as in 'Those are your words, not mine!' If Jesus' response were an acknowledgement of the title, Pilate would have sentenced him to death immediately, rather than looking for a way to acquit him. Calling Jesus 'king' at this time would imply that he was one of several revolutionaries trying to overthrow the Roman occupiers and establish himself as king, something the historical Jesus rejects. We need only turn to Mark 10 to hear Jesus' warning to his disciples about the kind of leadership Jesus had in mind; 'you know that those who are recognised as rulers over the Gentiles, lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority felt. But it shall not happen among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be slave of all. For the Son of Man...'. This type of leadership turns the 'king thing' upside down. Leaders of Christian communities are concerned with service, not power.

This seems to be why Jesus in today's interchange with Pilate tells him that if he is going to insist on addressing him as king, he'd better come up with a better definition of the term. 'My kingdom does not belong to this world. If it did.....'. Once again, using his 'you say it, I don't' response, Jesus informs Pilate about the issues that lie at the heart of his ministry: 'for this was I born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice'.

We Christians have yet to establish this kind of leadership on any large scale. Even if Jesus is not a king according to the common definition, he is still 'ruler of the kings of earth'. The risen Jesus present among us has more influence in our lives than any other authority figure. Jesus really is our Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end of our existence. We must remember that Jesus died in order to be rid once and for all of the temptation to reduce his Gospel to a political force in society. It is in living on our part by his life and his truth that we share in the hope of a kingdom when the Church will finally cease to be one among other social groups, because God will be all in all.

REFLECTION 2: KING JESUS

In the opening scene of the animated 'Lion King' movie, a new day is dawning and all creatures are moving towards the great assembly. Flocks of birds wing their way over the jungle world, elephants plod, zebras run, and antelopes leap. On top of the highest precipice all the creatures waiting below for his announcement revere The Lion King. In his nearby den is The Lion King's lioness with her newborn son. In many ways The Lion King is the retelling of the story of our God and his son and how we all came to give him glory. Today's feast of Christ the King enables us once again to consider our role in the world and Christ's kingship over all creation and us.

The years following the Great War of 1914-18 were years of trouble and turmoil. Many nations struggled to come to terms with the horrors that had befallen the world. Before long another war erupted, driven by the expansionist will of Hitler, so the 1920s and 1930s are known now as the 'inter-war' years. It was during this time of political upheaval, with old empires broken apart and new nations coming into being all over Europe that Pope Pius XI published a letter to the whole church and the whole world, to place before everyone the vital importance of Jesus as the ruler of all. The year was 1925 and already dictators were flourishing in the shape of Mussolini and the new forms of government in Soviet Russia – where formerly Lenin and then Stalin would rule with an iron fist, a new secularism and a world ruled without reference to God. Pius felt the urgent need to speak to this changing world about the rule and reign of God over all human life. So he wrote a letter 'Quas Primas' which instituted the Feast we observe today, that of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe. In our world today, we are accustomed to secularism and a church that has to accommodate itself to an ever-changing world. Church and State is still a battleground and nowhere is this more in evidence than in the Ireland of today.

The Solemnity of Christ the King brings the church year to a close (Advent begins next Sunday). Only in this year's readings does the Gospel refer to Jesus as King. It reminds us that the original celebration of Christ the King is the feast of the Ascension - the one who ascends to the right hand of the Father is the crucified and risen Christ. It proclaims who Christ is, from where and why he came and it reminds us of what sort of kingship he wields. The Gospel of John (Jn. 18: 33-37) consists of a dialogue. Pilate's discussion with Jesus has multiple layers of meaning and includes Jesus' attempt to lure Pilate to become involved on a deeper level of interaction than he is ready or willing to risk. Jesus is indeed a king but not of this world. Earthly kings rule by power and force, while Jesus' kingship is based on loving relationships. Jesus says that he has come into this world to testify to the truth, the truth of who God is and everyone who belongs to the truth hears his voice. His kingship is that of the Good Shepherd - a shepherd whose voice the sheep cherish and who looks after the least and the lost. To participate in his reign, we need to hear and heed the voice of Our Shepherd King.