

The Feast of Christ the King – Pentecost 27- November 25, 2018

In Nomine+

The Feast of Christ the King, which we are celebrating today, has a fairly short history, as major feasts go. It was only in 1925, that Pope Pius XI established it on the last Sunday of October. Paul VI moved it to its present location on the Last Sunday after Pentecost and the Sunday before Advent. Pope Pius' intent, we are told, was to counter what he perceived as a creeping secularism, especially in Italy. He believed that a feast day which asserted the superiority of Christ's power and dominance over all things, would be helpful to this end. His proclamation to the laity at that time stated: "If to Christ our Lord is given all power in heaven and on earth; if all men, purchased by his precious blood, are by a new right subjected to his dominion; if this power embraces all men, it must be clear that not one of our faculties is exempt from his empire. He must reign in our minds, which should assent with perfect submission and firm belief to revealed truths and to the doctrines of Christ. He must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God. He must reign in our hearts, which should spurn natural desires and love God above all things, and cleave to him alone. He must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments for the interior sanctification of our souls, or to use the words of the Apostle Paul, as instruments of justice unto God." These are noble words of faith and conviction, and are certainly to be heeded, read, marked and inwardly digested by all who claim Jesus Christ as their Savior, Redeemer and Lord.

Yet, while we assert by faith, the universal, royal power and moral authority embodied by the concept of Christ the King, clear evidence of its influence in our day to day world is rather hard to come by. Everywhere we look, we see alarming evidence of a kingdom, not coming, but rather coming apart at the seams. People of faith call upon Jesus to counter fire, flood and storm; to foster world peace and end hunger and starvation; to raise up good and strong leaders and to humble the wicked, arrogant and selfish; and still these scourges persist. Where is the evidence of a potent force for Good overseeing our existence? When will we finally see some victories to mark the promised encroachment of the kingdom which has no end in our own experiential frame? The unbelievers and sceptics reasonably ask: If he is the King, the Lord, the all-powerful one, why does he allow such evil to persist? Why is this world such a mess?

I think Jesus must just be exhausted with these questions. He has been responding to them, now for more than two thousand years. His position was pretty clear. He said, himself, at a most critical point in his career, "My kingdom is not of this world!" In response to Pilot's question whether he was a king, Jesus replied, "'King' is your word. My task is to bear witness to the truth. For this I was born; for this I came into the world, and all who are not deaf to truth listen to my voice." In his own time, people asked for signs so that they might believe, and Jesus occasionally rewarded them with signs or miracles, but mostly he did not. To do so would have validated their unbelief and added encouragement to the subtle greed and deceptive selfishness that looks for reciprocity for service and reward for assurance rather than boundless grace for salvation. On other occasions, Jesus made a swift exit, when it appeared to him that people who were so avidly following him about were preparing to call on him to be king or at least to enter into some kind of power-seeking dynamic. King was definitely not a title which Jesus sought or welcomed!

So, why would Pope Pius choose such a problematic title for what is clearly a worthy addition to our feast day calendar? I think we have to look to the cultural confusion of the era for a possible answer. Prior to World War I, most of the countries of Europe were headed by monarchs. These were powerful symbols of national identity and in most cases, offered assurances of personal security as well. Following World War I, most of the crowned heads of Europe were gone, leaving a vacuum that was impossible to overlook, and a type of cultural anxiety about the future which carried universal dimensions, regardless of how one felt about the monarchical system of government and societal order. It has been said that all nature abhors a vacuum, and I believe that it was Pope Pius' hope that encouraging a greater devotion to Christian doctrine and principles would quickly fill that vacuum. That it was brutal totalitarianism that filled it, faster and with more virulence than anyone could have reasonably imagined, is one of the profoundly sad lessons of history that must never be forgotten. It is likely that the only population that was moved by the proffered direction of Pius' efforts, were those who were already deeply committed to the resurrected and ascended Christ in their personal spiritual journeys.

And, it is to that particular segment of the faith community, that the Feast of Christ the King speaks most clearly and forcefully. Our Gospel for the day takes us back in the liturgical year to Palm Sunday. This pericope is called, "The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem," and it is re-enacted each year on Palm Sunday in Jerusalem with great joy and enthusiasm. I was a part of that exuberant throng for Palm Sunday, 2017, one of the oddly infrequent years when all branches of Christianity, Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, Copts, non-denominational and sectarian, celebrated Easter on the same day! The crowds usually numbering around 15,000 were enormous, and they were all bent on making the march from the church in Bethphage, which marks the spot from which the donkey was borrowed, to the remnant of Herod's Temple by way of the Lion Gate (the Golden Gate through which Jesus would have walked was permanently sealed by the Ottomans in the 16th century). Although the parade for centuries has originated in Bethany, the Israeli security wall has completely severed Bethany from Jerusalem, so for the time being, Bethphage has become the starting point. A lone donkey with a cloth saddle leads the procession, but is quickly followed by a regal color guards, marching bands, dance-troops, pilgrims, old and young, some in wheel chairs and some in strollers. Flags and banners of every description and intention flutter from distinctive groups who have come long distances to be a part of this commemoration. Many carry gigantic palm branches and sing hymns of praise in a wild assortment of tongues. On that day, everyone is celebrating the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who reigns in Glory, wars and natural disasters, not withstanding. No one is thinking about celebrating temporal power, except perhaps the Israeli security forces, armed with their M16s who are there, everywhere, to "keep the peace."

Such could not be said about the crowds who welcomed Jesus as he rode to his death on a borrowed colt. Their shouts were for an earthly king who would free them from the oppression of the Romans and restore the Davidic monarchy; who would purify the Temple and reform the cult, including the restoration the Levitical priesthood; who would usher in an age of unimaginable prosperity and wealth. No wonder he was susceptible to the charge of sedition, of challenging the authority of Rome and its sycophants and disturbing the peace. To the very last, even within his own close circle of disciples there were those who were looking for position and preferment in his "kingdom."

I think when it is asked today, what kind of a king can be ruling over this mess, we are echoing the shouts of those palm wavers and clock tossers of the first century. We want a hero! We want a miracle worker! We want to see progress! We want to see some signs of victory! We want to know when the rewards will start! But, the Christ, whose kingdom is not of this world does not answer to the world's demands, and certainly not on schedule. He still speaks to the Truth. A truth which surpasses human understanding. A truth which is only comprehensible to those who have chosen to be obedient to the laws of his eternal and glorious kingdom and to live faithfully under his rule.

If we are still seeking proof of his kingship, we need look only to his resurrection. If we want evidence of his power, we need only to witness the transformation that took place among his wavering, on again, off again followers. If we need reassurance of his presence, we need only to call on his Holy Spirit for guidance and affirmation. That is why I am sure that the Palm Sunday marchers in 2017 were celebrating the victory of Christ the King, because history has proven the potency of the spiritual forces that he released on this sinful world and then charged and emboldened the faithful citizens of his realm to engage the enemy and carry forth the conquest of evil and hatred by truth and love, in all times and places.

Christ is a king, to those who know and love him, to those who have chosen to reside in his kingdom. Citizenship in the Christ's kingdom is a matter of free choice. It is highly unlikely that Christ will ever perform the dazzling miracles that would be able to persuade the doubtful and cynical of his might. But he has assembled a mighty host, to whom he has given a charge, a mandate to preach the good news to the whole creation. Many in this world have been deaf to the message, and many continue to be willfully deaf. But, as Jesus opened the ears of the deaf and the eyes of the blind, that power resides in his community of faith, who will persist until his kingdom comes on earth, as it is in heaven. To the extent that we, who have taken on his name, speak his truth and demonstrate his love, his kingdom will manifest itself before our own unbelieving eyes, and perhaps through us, others may come to see, hear and know the Christ is King. Blessed is the King who is coming. His wisdom, power and mercy endure forever and ever.

Amen.