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21 November 2021

Our Lord Jesus Christ King of the Universe

Reflection by Joe Tedesco

Introduction

The liturgical year ends with a feast recognising the supreme lordship of Christ. The readings of the liturgy speak of the various ways Christ as king can be understood and encountered.

Penitential Act

Use one of the *Roman Missal* texts or this optional litany form:

Lord Jesus, you came into the world to bear witness to the truth. Lord, have mercy.
You call us to listen to your voice. Christ, have mercy.
You draw us into the kingdom of God. Lord, have mercy.

First Reading

Daniel 7:13-14

The kings that Israel knew came and went. Daniel envisions a new king that will be of a different kind, one whose reign will never end and whose subjects will include people of the whole world.

Second Reading

Revelation 1:5-8

Christ's authority is complete. No time or place is beyond his presence. This eternal Christ has established a kingdom not by might and power, but by his blood.

Gospel Reading

John 18:33b-37

The interaction between Jesus and Pilate reveals Christ as King, but a king not from this world. We are invited to encounter the King by listening to his voice as it reveals truth into our lives.

Reflection

It is often noted that the feast of Christ the King is a relatively recent addition to the Catholic calendar being instituted formally by Pope Pius XI in 1925. Of course, the concept of Christ as king pre-dates this and is found as far back as the earliest accounts of Jesus. Indeed, the title Christ itself has a royal import. It comes from a translation of the Hebrew term messiah which was understood to be one who is a king in the Davidic line. Thus, right at the beginning of the Gospel story when the magi from the east come looking for Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, they ask for “the newborn king of the Jews” (2:1). That Christ is understood as King is nothing controversial in that sense. It is an appropriate title and there is much theological reflection that it offers.

On the other hand, there is an apprehensive aspect to the concept of kingship as found in the Christian tradition. Despite the above reference of the magi in the Christmas story, there is not a lot of mention of Christ as King in the Gospels and even fewer in the rest of the New Testament. Nearly all references to Jesus as king appear in and around the Passion (as they do in today’s reading). In contrast, Jesus’ ministry is dotted with moments where he shuns claims to power that might be offered to him.

Further, where Christ and kingship is most expressed, it is more commonly done so in a deriding manner. Even the adulation offered at Palm Sunday from the crowd as they hail Jesus as king is but a mockery in the end.

Perhaps the incongruous aspect of kingship is particularly so because of what it represents; power, authority, dominion, control. Of course, there is such a thing as a ‘good king’ and those notions are not inherently immoral or ungodly, and so they can and have been ascribed to God. However, as far as human experience is concerned, there also is a recognition that claims to power can be inherently dangerous, misunderstood and often abused. Moreover, they tend to fool us into trusting human capacity and human institutions in ways that are rather insidious.

This is illustrated in some of the oldest biblical traditions. When Israel, as the chosen people of God, were settling into the ‘promised land’, it was made clear that they were not to have a king like other nations. The title itself was suspicious for various reasons, most prominently as it might usurp God’s authority. For example, when the Israelites wanted to make Gideon their king following his victory over the Midianites, he refused stating that he nor his sons would rule over them as king, for “the Lord must rule over you” (Judges 8:23). Nevertheless, Israel’s cry was they wanted a king whose power and might they could see in action like other nations had (1 Sam 8:5, 20).

Israel’s tradition recognised that we too easily seek to trust what we see and feel rather than what is given by faith. Gideon and his ilk knew that trusting in God totally is harder than trusting in human institutions even though any human authority is inherently destined to fail in some way.

In a strange way, Pilate is falling into a similar trap in today's Gospel, though to a different end. The opening question from Pilate asks Jesus quite frankly if he is "king of the Jews". Jesus' answer is telling. He does not immediately answer the question but, rather, asks Pilate a reflective question back. It is quite possible that, at this point, Jesus is teaching us that there are various perceptions at play when it comes to encountering him. Are you going on what you think for yourself or on what people tell you? More fully, it seems the response Jesus effectively gave Pilate is; are you willing to encounter me openly and honestly (in truth) and discover for yourself whether and what sort of king I am?

Of course, Pilate fobs off the question and comes back at Jesus; "what have you done?" Jesus then replies to the original question and admits that he has a kingdom and, by virtue of that, that he is a king. However, crucially, Christ is not a king of the kind that Pilate understands or probably thinks even exists – which is why Jesus' initial reply mattered. Yes, Jesus is a king, but you are not going to know of what kind unless you are willing to see and experience what this king and kingdom is like.

Pilate, like the Israelites of Gideon's time and like many of us to this day, think the only sort of authority that matters is that which exercises power over and command of material and people. Pilate himself will make claim to that sort of authority when he confronts Jesus again later in the Johannine account of the Passion (19:10-11).

The final sentence in our gospel reading is a most telling statement when it comes to the notion of kingship being reflected on today. Christ states "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." (Jn 18:27). John's Gospel is full of moments where Jesus talks of 'hearing his voice'. Jesus states, for example, how he is the shepherd whose "sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." And the sheep follow because they "listen and know his voice" (10:3-4). Jesus doesn't call from afar and anonymously, but with love and with intimate knowledge.

When we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King, we are not only celebrating that Christ is a king, but that Christ is a king of a particular kind. We are challenged to live and trust in a sort of kingship that is not easily grasped. It requires that we lay aside, both in thought and practice, what we normally attribute to authority – worldly power, prestige and exclusivity. To trust less what the world tells us is powerful and worthy and more what God indicates it is. To align ourselves to the only authority that matters, the one that can be harder to find, but the one that we are ultimately intended to sit under and the only one that will ultimately last.

Prayer of the Faithful

Introduction

The psalmist reminds us that God's holy presence is with us until the end of time. Therefore, with confidence, we offer our needs in prayer.

Petitions

We pray for the leaders of our Church. As we work towards the final meeting of the Plenary Council next year may our desire for leadership by the Holy Spirit be truly evident.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for those in political power throughout the world. May they work justly to restore their people from the effects of the pandemic and climate change.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for vocations in the Church, that the Spirit may inspire young people to answer God's call to marriage, the priesthood, the religious life and the single life, so that the Gospel may be brought to all people.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for those who are blinded by the pursuit of wealth and commercial gain at the expense of the vulnerable, that they may be touched by the selfless love of Christ and become generous and kind.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for this parish community, that our eyes may be opened to the needs of others and we may offer ourselves to the service of God every day knowing that Christ will restore all things when he comes in glory.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

We pray for those who are suffering through mental and physical illness as well as grief. May the presence of Christ be evident through the love of those who care for them.

(Pause) Lord hear us OR We pray to the Lord.

Conclusion

God has done great things for us and we are filled with joy at the Son's healing presence. Through the power of the Spirit, listen to our prayer and grant us the eyes of faith to see you in all things as we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.

Music selections by Alessio Loiacono and Chris deSilva

GA

All the ends of the earth. B. Dufford SJ. 420
By your kingly power, O risen Lord. J. McAuley/ R. Connolly. 352
Hail redeemer, king divine! P. Brennan CSSR. 390
Holy God we praise your name. C. Winkworth. 411
Holy Father, God of might. R. Connolly. 424

AOV1

All the ends of the earth. B. Dufford SJ. 76
Praise my soul, the king of Heaven. H. Lyte/ J. Goss. 78

AOV2

Holy God we praise your name. C. Winkworth. 129

CWB

By your kingly power O risen Lord. James Phillip McAuley. 633
Christ, our Lord, the Prince of ages. Anon. 644
Hail redeemer, king divine. Patrick Brennan CSsR. 703
Rejoice, the Lord is king! Charles Wesley. 799
To Christ, the prince of peace. Tr. Edward Caswall. 846
To Jesus Christ, our sovereign king. Martin Hellriegel. 847

CWBII

By your kingly power O risen Lord. James Phillip McAuley. 352
Christ is the king! O friends rejoice. George K. A. Bell. 398
Christ, our Lord, the prince of ages. Anon. 399
Hail, redeemer, king divine! Patrick Brennan C SSR. 400
To Jesus Christ, our sov'reign king. Martin B. Hellriegel. 401

Psalms Selected by Chris deSilva and Angela McCarthy

Psalm 92: *The Lord is king; he is robed in majesty.*
Psalm 92: Gregory Murray OSB/ Joseph Gelineau SJ. CWB 449
Psalm 93 (92): Jenny O'Brien. JOBB pg. 108
The Lord is king: Tony Alonso. LPB pg. 178