

Christ the King **By Jim Seghers**

The Feast of Christ the King, officially called the Feast of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, is celebrated by the Roman Catholic Church as well as many Anglicans, Lutherans, and other Mainline Protestants, in addition to the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. Pope Pius XI instituted the feast in 1925 in response to growing nationalism and secularism that led to the horrors of World War II. It is celebrated on the last Sunday in the liturgical year, before a new year begins with the First Sunday in Advent.

This celebration is a reminder of the Lordship of the Risen Savior. It sums up the mystery of Jesus “directing our gaze toward the perfect realization of the Kingdom of God, when God will be all in all (cf. 1 Cor. 15:28). St. Cyril of Jerusalem says: ‘We proclaim not only the Lord’s first coming but also a second coming that is much more beautiful than the first. The first, in fact, was a manifestation of suffering, the second is crowned with the diadem of divine royalty ... in the first he was subjected to the humiliation of the cross, in the second he is surrounded and glorified by a throng of angels.’ The whole mission of Jesus and the content of his message consist in proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven and of establishing it among men with signs and wonders.”¹

“We are invited “to look to the future, or more properly into the depths, to the ultimate goal of history, which will be the definitive and eternal kingdom of Christ. He was with the Father in the beginning, when the world was created, and he will fully manifest his lordship at the end of time, when he will judge all mankind.” The three readings at Mass speak to us of this kingdom. The Gospel passage is drawn from Saint John. “Jesus appears in humiliating circumstances – he stands accused – before the might of Rome. He had been arrested, insulted, mocked, and now his enemies hope to obtain his condemnation to death by crucifixion. They had presented him to Pilate as one who sought political power, as the self-proclaimed King of the Jews. The Roman procurator conducts his inquiry and asks Jesus: ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ (Jn 18:33). In reply to this question, Jesus clarifies the nature of his kingship and his messiahship itself, which is no worldly power but a love which serves. He states that his kingdom is in no way to be confused with a political reign: ‘My kingship is not of this world ... is not from the world (v. 36).’”

“Jesus clearly had no political ambitions. After the multiplication of the loaves, the people, enthralled by the miracle, wanted to take him away and make him their king, in order to overthrow the power of Rome and thus establish a new political kingdom which would be considered the long-awaited kingdom of God. But Jesus knows that God’s kingdom is of a completely different kind; it is not built on arms and violence. The multiplication of the loaves itself becomes both the sign that he is the Messiah and a watershed in his activity: henceforth the path to the Cross becomes ever clearer; there, in the supreme act of love, the promised

¹ Unless indicated otherwise the quotations are drawn from two sermons by Pope Benedict XVI on the occasion of this feast.

kingdom, the kingdom of God, will shine forth. But the crowd does not understand this; they are disappointed and Jesus retires to the mountain to pray in solitude, to pray with the Father (cf. Jn 6:1-15). In the Passion narrative we see how even the disciples, though they had shared Jesus' life and listened to his words, were still thinking of a political kingdom, brought about also by force. In Gethsemane, Peter had unsheathed his sword and began to fight, but Jesus stopped him (cf. Jn 18:10-11). He does not wish to be defended by arms, but to accomplish the Father's will to the end, and to establish his kingdom not by armed conflict, but by the apparent weakness of life-giving love. The kingdom of God is a kingdom utterly different from earthly kingdoms."

"That is why, faced with a defenseless, weak and humiliated man, as Jesus was, a man of power like Pilate is taken aback; taken aback because he hears of a kingdom and servants. So he asks an apparently odd question: 'So you are a king?' What sort of king can such a man as this be? But Jesus answers in the affirmative: 'You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice' (18:37). Jesus speaks of kings and kingship, yet he is not referring to power but to truth. Pilate fails to understand: can there be a power not obtained by human means? A power which does not respond to the logic of domination and force? Jesus came to reveal and bring a new kingship, that of God; he came to bear witness to the truth of a God who is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8,16), who wants to establish a kingdom of justice, love and peace. Whoever is open to love hears this testimony and accepts it with faith, to enter the kingdom of God."

"We find this same perspective in the first reading. "The prophet Daniel foretells the power of a mysterious personage set between heaven and earth: 'Behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed' (7:13-14). These words present a king who reigns from sea to sea, to the very ends of the earth, possessed of an absolute power which will never be destroyed. This vision of the prophet, a messianic vision, is made clear and brought to fulfillment in Christ: the power of the true Messiah, the power which will never pass away or be destroyed, is not the power of the kingdoms of the earth which rise and fall, but the power of truth and love. In this way we understand how the kingship proclaimed by Jesus in the parables and openly and explicitly revealed before the Roman procurator, is the kingship of truth, the one which gives all things their light and grandeur."

"In the second reading, the author of the Book of Revelation states that we too share in Christ's kingship. In the acclamation addressed 'to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood', he declares that Christ 'has made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father' (1:5-6). Here too it is clear that we are speaking of a kingdom based on a relationship with God, with truth, and not a political kingdom. By his sacrifice, Jesus has opened for us the path to a profound relationship with God: in him we have become true adopted children and thus sharers in his kingship over the world. To be disciples of Jesus, then, means not letting ourselves be allured by the worldly logic of power, but bringing into the world the light of truth

and God's love. The author of the Book of Revelation broadens his gaze to include Jesus' second coming to judge mankind and to establish forever his divine kingdom, and he reminds us that conversion, as a response to God's grace, is the condition for the establishment of this kingdom (cf. 1:7). It is a pressing invitation addressed to each and all: to be converted ever anew to the kingdom of God, to the lordship of God, of Truth, in our lives. We invoke the kingdom daily in the prayer of the "Our Father" with the words "Thy kingdom come"; in effect we say to Jesus: Lord, make us yours, live in us, gather together a scattered and suffering humanity, so that in you all may be subjected to the Father of mercy and love."

Every Christian is entrusted with the "demanding responsibility: to bear witness to the kingdom of God, to the truth. This means working to bring out ever more clearly the priority of God and his will over the interests of the world and its powers. Become imitators of Jesus, who, before Pilate, in the humiliating scene described by the Gospel, manifested his glory: that of loving to the utmost, giving his own life for those whom he loves. This is the revelation of the kingdom of Jesus. And for this reason, with one heart and one soul, let us pray: *Adveniat regnum tuum* – Thy kingdom come. Amen." In a world far more secular and in danger than it was in 1925, actualizing Christ's kingdom in this pagan culture is a daunting challenge and a great mission.