

Christ's Kingly Rule from Emptiness to Fullness

Solemnity of Christ The King – Cycle C – 24 November 2019

Readings: 2 Sam 5:1-3; Col 1:12-20; Lk 25:35-43

“All things have been created through him and for him” (Col 1:16)

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading must be seen in the context of Ancient Israel under kingly rule. Saul was the first king of Israel who was told by Prophet Samuel that kingship would not be remain in his family since he had disobeyed God's word (1 Sam 15:26). Instead, David was chosen by God and anointed secretly by Samuel (1 Sam 16:13). Having fled from Saul, David settled in Hebron and ruled over the tribes of Judah (southern kingdom) as king for seven years. In today's passage, after Saul's death, the people of the northern kingdom come to David and tell him: “Look, we are your bone and flesh ...” claiming kinship with him as descendants of Abraham. They remind David of his warring successes over the powerful Philistines when he was an officer of Saul's army. They also remind him of God's choice of him as king, using the imagery of ‘shepherd’, saying: “It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel.” To be a ‘shepherd’ demanded that one be outstanding in two things: (a) service, and (b) sacrifice. First, the king was to be a ‘sacrament of God’, so to say, by giving visibility to an invisible God through loving service. Second, if the need arose, the king was expected to die so as to save those of his sheepfold. David accepts kingship and makes a covenant with the people who promise fidelity and allegiance to him. Then, although he was already anointed by Samuel earlier, he is now publicly acknowledged by all—of the northern and southern kingdoms—as supreme ruler and king.
2. The gospel passage taken from the passion narrative of evangelist Luke is ironical since although Jesus belongs to the royal lineage of David, he dies as a crucified king: seemingly powerless, helpless, brutalized and nailed to a cross. Ironically, he is crucified precisely because his persecutors accuse him of claiming kingship, thereby posing a grave threat to the Roman government. All the four gospels mention the inscription on the cross: ‘This is the King of the Jews’. Within a few centuries the man on the cross would be adored as the ‘King of kings’. For Christians, the irony of Jesus' kingship is that, although he is son of God (divine) and of the royal lineage of King David (human), he does a ‘double descent’, so to say. First, the Word of God becomes flesh in Bethlehem's stable; second, this incarnational comedown is followed by another total self-emptying (kenosis) when God undergoes the most cruel and shameful of deaths by being crucified on Calvary.
3. The sneers and jeers of the crowd—“If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!”—seem to echo the first temptations that Jesus had for choosing a comfortable life and rejecting the way of the cross. The challenge of the crowds to Jesus to come down from the cross, and the taunts of the soldiers seem to amplify what you and I desire, today: a painless, cross-less Christianity. The voices of the two crucified criminals are representative of the godly and the ungodly, the repentant and the unrepentant, those who believe in an afterlife and those who do not. The crucified king does not come down from the cross; but promises

the Godfearing and repentant criminal: “Today you will be with me in paradise” (v.43). Heaven’s doors are thrown open first to a sinner, not to a saint!

Linking the Second Reading to the Theme of Christ’s Kingship

The 2nd reading succinctly sums up the full significance of today’s feast. Christ is Saviour and Redeemer because: “in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers” (v.16). Christ is “the head of the body, the church In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (v.20). Expressed here is an overwhelming expanse of Christ’s kingship in space and in time—embracing all peoples, all things, all times—but only possible by treading the bloody path from emptiness to fullness, and from suffering and strife to glorious, eternal life.

Lights from Catholic Tradition:

Cyril of Alexandria (376 - 444 AD): “Christ has dominion over all creatures by essence and by nature. His kingship is founded upon the hypostatic union... The Word of God, as consubstantial with the Father, has all things in common with him, and therefore has necessarily supreme and absolute dominion over all things created. Christ is also King by acquired, as well as by natural right, for he is our Redeemer. ... God also bestowed upon Christ the nations of the world as His special possession and dominion: ‘All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me’ (Mt 28:18).”

Pope Pius XI—whose papacy was from 1922 to 1939—instituted the feast of ‘Christ the King’ in 1925 with his encyclical entitled ‘*Quas Primas*’. In n.35, he writes: “Nations will be reminded by the annual celebration of this feast that not only private individuals but also rulers and princes are bound to give public honor and obedience to Christ. It will call to their minds the thought of the last judgment, wherein Christ, who has been cast out of public life, despised, neglected and ignored, will most severely avenge these insults; for his kingly dignity demands that the State should take account of the commandments of God and of Christian principles.”

Reflection: At the end of this liturgical ‘Year C’, let’s tread along Christ’s kingly march from emptiness to fullness. Ponder upon this abridged passage: ‘One Solitary Life’ and gaze at HIM:

“ Nineteen centuries have come and gone; and today Jesus is the central figure of the human race and the leader of humankind’s progress. All the armies that have ever marched; all the navies that have ever sailed. All the parliaments that have ever sat; all the kings that have ever reigned put together, have not affected the life of humankind on earth as powerfully as that one solitary life.”

An Apt Story: A king once fell in love with a poor girl. He first thought of simply bringing her to the palace and marrying her; but he realized this wouldn’t work since she’d soon realize the immense difference in their backgrounds and not be happy. After reflection, he decided to renounce his kingdom and go and live near her so that she’d realize how deeply he loved her. Shocking one and all, he left the palace. This story—adapted from philosopher Kierkegaard’s original—reveals the great love of Christ, our King, who traces the path from emptiness to fullness.
