

## CHRIST THE KING – C November 25, 2007

Today we come to the final feast of the Church year, traditionally called Christ the King but more formally referred to as Our Lord Jesus Christ the King. Next Sunday, of course, begins a brand new Church year as well as the season of Advent, which prepares us for Christmas. But this feast of Christ the King presents us with an image of Christ as an earthly ruler as well as a heavenly king.

When I was a little kid I saw a movie about the crucifixion, you know there've been a lot of them over the years, and I remember being terrified. There was poor Jesus, hanging on the cross, the sky was very dark, almost black; there was thunder and lightning and wind, probably some kind of earthquake, lots of noise and drama.

All the soldiers and Roman officials were scurrying around in fear, and I remember thinking: Uh-huh, that's what you get for killing Jesus. As a child, I wasn't able to understand that Jesus first *had* to die in order to rise from the dead. But even for those of us who aren't children anymore, that image of Jesus dying on the cross is a far cry from the concept of Jesus as a king.

Every Catholic Church building has a crucifix, usually in some prominent place. This one here. Take a moment now and examine it closely. Jesus is pictured just at the moment he surrendered his life for the world. This is the moment of his great act of obedience. If you look closely you can see the inscription INRI, the abbreviation of the Latin inscription "Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum," Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews. This wasn't actually an identification of the man hanging there; you see, because the *claim* that he was the king of the Jews was the actual offense.

There was a similar practice in the early American colonies: when a criminal was placed in the stock, a sign was attached above his head to explain the offense. No doubt the Romans and the Jews got a good laugh out of this; Jesus looked like anything but a king hanging there helplessly.

But it is even more interesting that Pontius Pilate worded the sign this way. We read later in the Gospels that when someone tried to correct the sign so it would read: "This man *claimed* to be king of the Jews," Pilate is said to have replied, "Quod scripsi, scripsi." What I have written, I have written. And so, without even realizing it, Pontius Pilate fulfilled scripture and actually promoted the real identity of Jesus. As happens in various places in scripture—and even in life—God used a non-believer to make his own presence known.

Now look at the crucifix again. Jesus doesn't look much like a king here, does he? And yet, no other king has had a reign that lasted 2,000 years. No other king has ruled with such love. No other king sacrificed himself for his people in this way. No other king led others by such perfect example. Perhaps the simplicity of his life and the tragedy of his death are his way of telling us that all the physical splendors and material wealth of this life just don't mean very much in the end.

In today's first reading, from the second book of Samuel, we see that the very young shepherd boy David was anointed king of Israel by the elders. This anointing with oil gave him the ability to be both a leader and a shepherd, both necessary qualities for a good king. In the OT, kings and priests and prophets were anointed with oil because for thousands of years oil has been regarded as a symbol of strength. Is it surprising, then, that four of our seven sacraments

contain some kind of anointing with oil: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Orders, and Anointing of the Sick? Each of these sacraments is intended to give strength to the one who receives it.

The second reading is from St. Paul's letter to the Colossians. He tells us that Jesus is before all else that is, and therefore he is the head of the body, the Body of Christ, which is the Church. It is through him, then, that we have redemption, the forgiveness of our sins. That's something else no other king can do.

St. Luke's gospel gives us the fascinating conversation between Jesus and the two criminals who were executed with him. One of them blasphemes Jesus, ridiculing him by saying: "Save yourself, and while you're at it, save us too." We can hear the sarcasm here.

Oddly enough, the other criminal does not ask to be saved *physically*, but asks for the Kingdom. It's really a lot to ask for, when you think about it, in fact it's more than the other criminal wanted. He only wanted to be let down off the cross; anyone could have done that for him.

But the one who wants salvation is given it, just because he asked. Notice that, even though they are both criminals, probably guilty of serious crimes, Jesus does not reprimand either one of them; he doesn't condemn them, or tell them it's their own fault they're hanging there, or say that they deserve to be punished. Hanging from the cross, his last breaths are dedicated only to forgiveness.

In a world that is seemingly overwhelmed by political turmoil, war, injustice, famine and hunger, and of course terrorism, as well as general greed and selfishness, it is comforting to know that as believers we ultimately belong to a kingdom of another world, the eternal Kingdom of God, where Jesus Christ truly is king.