

Homily on Matthew 25:31-46; November 22 & 23, 2014 The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

Today the Church is celebrating the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe. We have reached the last Sunday of Ordinary Time, signaling the end of the Church's liturgical year. The Solemnity of Christ the King brings to our attention the all-encompassing authority of Jesus Christ as King and Lord. This feast was instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius XI. He did this because he was concerned that many of the faithful were turning away from Christ and His Church, and embracing the non-Christian, nationalistic, dictatorships that were gaining power at that time. Many of these emerging governments were openly, and even intensely hostile to the Catholic Faith. Pope Pius hoped the institution of this Solemnity would bring about three primary things:

1. Nations would recognize the Church has a right to freedom and immunity from state interference.
2. That leaders and nations of the world would see that they needed to respect Jesus Christ and His Church.
3. That the faithful would be strengthened and encouraged by being reminded that it is Jesus Christ who must reign in our hearts, minds, wills, and bodies.

The idea that we should have a king can sound strange to us, after all we are Americans, and our nation was founded in a rebellion against a king. We inherently know that entrusting too much power in any one person is a very dangerous thing, and so we have this natural distrust of anything to do with a king. This idea of distrust and suspicion of kingly authority is certainly not anything new. The idea of power leading to injustice and corruption is one that runs throughout the Old Testament, and one to which our first reading is particularly directed.

To better understand today's readings, it is helpful to understand the Jewish notion of kingship as it played out in the Old Testament. The nation of Israel began when Moses led the people out of slavery in Egypt. Moses led the people, but he was not their king. He was a prophet,

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and it was through him that God guided His chosen people. This was the pattern of how God governed Israel during their time in the wilderness, and during their time of conquest and occupation of the Promised Land. God would raise up men and women to “judge” or govern the people. The stories of these men and women are found in the “Book of Judges”. These are some of the great stories of the Bible. Stories of great heroes and heroines like Sampson, Debora, and Gideon. These stories have a common theme, one that shows when Israel trusts in God and follows His ways, they would be delivered from their enemies and enter into a time of peace and prosperity. But when they turned away from God and ignored His will, things didn’t go quite so well.

The last judge of Israel was the Prophet Samuel. The Scriptures tell us, “Samuel judged Israel into his old age in righteousness.” Near the end of his life he appointed his two sons to take his place. Unfortunately his sons were not as righteous as Samuel; in fact they were quite corrupt. The elders of Israel came to Samuel saying, “Appoint a king over us, as other nations have, to judge us.” This was Israel saying, “We want to be like the other nations around us.” “We want a leader to follow, one we can look up to.” Now, when we hear Israel saying they want to be like everybody else, we need to know that this is not a good thing. Israel was never meant to be like everybody else. They were God’s chosen people. They had a special mission. They were meant to show the world, that if you trusted in God, and followed His ways, you would lead a life of blessedness; a life of meaning and fulfillment. Israel, by their example, was supposed to draw the other nations of the world to God. So when they say, “We want to be like everybody else.” They are in fact shunning their mission and turning away from God. Samuel knew all this, and knew this wasn’t good, but he prays to God about it. God answers him saying, “Grant the people’s every request. It is not you they reject, they are rejecting me as their king.”

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For the next 400 years of their history, God gives the people what they asked for. The Jews are ruled by earthly kings, and with a few brief exceptions, such as during the reigns of David and Solomon, who had their own share of problems, they are subjected to the rule of some pretty notorious kings. This brings us to the time of our First Reading, from the Prophet Ezekiel. He is a prophet to the Jews in Babylon, where they are now in exile, exiled from the Land of Promise. They are in exile because they have been conquered, they have been conquered, because they have been led by kings who were only concerned with their own self-interest, concerned only about being served by their people, instead of being true servants of the people.

Our First Reading gives us the “good news” that God will once again, step in and govern his people. He will govern, not as a tyrant, but as a good shepherd, one who provides protection and care for His flock. He will rescue His sheep even when it is cloudy and dark. He will pasture them and give them rest. He will seek out the lost, bring back the strays, bind up the injured, and heal the sick.

This theme of God as a totally different kind of king; a servant king; a good shepherd; flows from this reading, through our responsorial psalm, and into the Gospel reading, where Jesus give us his prophetic vision of the Judgment of the Nations. Jesus will come in glory, with all His angels, and He will sit on His glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before Him for judgment.

This Gospel is one of those readings where Jesus is clearly stating His divinity. He is no earthly king. He is a divine king. He is the Judge of the Nations and judgment belongs to God alone. This is one of those passages that makes it very difficult to say, Jesus was only a nice man, or only a good moral teacher. This is one of those passages that compels a choice upon us; in the words of C.S. Lewis, Jesus Christ is either Lord, lunatic, or liar. There is no middle ground. He is

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either the Lord, the Son of the living God, the Judger of Nations, and one who demands our worship and obedience, or he is a lunatic or liar, making a ridiculous claim of divinity. The overwhelming evidence of Jesus' beautiful and clear teaching, His uncanny insight into human nature, and ultimately His resurrection, demolish those arguments for either lunatic or liar.

Jesus' claim to kingship, His claim to actually be God, once again, walking among His people, was very polarizing during His life. Those who encountered Him either became His followers or else sought to crucify Him. There was no middle ground. The same remains true for us today. His claim requires us to make a choice; we either dismiss Him as irrelevant, or we have to follow Him with our whole heart. Today's Gospel makes that very clear. This Gospel is a clarion call about what it means to claim Christ as our King. To choose Him, to be in his kingdom, we have to follow his example of service; follow his example of giving of Himself for others. Four times in the Gospel we hear the criteria to which we will be judged: Did we feed the hungry? Did we give drink to the thirsty? Did we welcome the stranger? Did we clothe the naked? Did we visit the sick? Did we go to those in prison? Jesus makes it crystal clear, when we serve the least of our brothers and sisters, we are serving Him. And it is by serving Him that we will find eternal life.

Pope Pius the XI instituted this Solemnity to bring to mind our need to hold Christ's kingship in our hearts. Much has changed since 1925, but in many ways, things are not that much different. It still is so easy for us to allow the things of the secular world to rule our hearts. It is so easy to allow the culture of today to infiltrate into our lives. It seeps into what we read, what we watch, and what we listen to. It is so easy to allow the things of this world to distract us, to absorb our time, and turn our attention away from God. When this happens, we need to realize we are behaving just like the Israelites of Samuel's time. We too, are forgetting about God as our King, and saying, "Give us a worldly king; we want to be just like everybody else." When we forget about God as our King, we

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are forgetting about that mission we have inherited, as the New Israel; that mission to proclaim to the world, by the witness of our lives, that God's way is the way to a life of blessedness and fulfillment. This Solemnity calls us to remember who we are, and to whom we belong.

The Solemnity of Christ the King signals the end of the Church's liturgical year. When we come to the end of a year, it is common to take some time and reflect back on the events of that year. It is appropriate then for us today, to reflect back on how well we have lived up to our King's expectations. Have we been able to keep Christ as the King of our hearts? How well have we served our King? How well have we cared for the least of our brothers and sisters?

It is also common at the beginning of a New Year to make those resolutions, being determined to be a better person in the New Year. As we approach the upcoming Advent Season, we should resolve to open our hearts to those who are the least among us, those with whom our King most closely identifies, those whom He calls us to serve. So that when our time comes to stand before Him, there won't be any surprises. We will know Him and he will know us. And the words we will hear, will be those most welcome words, "Come O blessed of my Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."