

The Solemnity of Christ the King

Thomas Gumbleton | Nov. 29, 2007 The Peace Pulpit

As I mentioned in introducing the second reading, the first followers of Jesus struggled with how to understand Jesus. Of course they had come to know him as someone who was born in Bethlehem, grew up in Nazareth; they knew his brothers, sisters, cousins and family. They saw him in every way that we see one another as human beings.

Now suddenly, as he has been put to death, has risen again, is among them and they experience him as risen, they struggle to try to grasp: "Well, who is this, this Jesus?" Then as St. Paul, borrowing from an early Christian hymn, describes Jesus, trying to get the sense that Jesus is beyond all of history, Jesus is outside of any limited human experience. Jesus is transcendent, he is the image of the unseen God, so when you see Jesus, you see God.

From all of creation, he is the first born into new life, the first who is son of God in power, and they also recognized that in Jesus, all things were created in heaven and on earth - visible and invisible. Everything is made through him and for him. He is before all, and all things hold together in him. As Paul says, he's also the head of his body, the church. He is the first, the first raised from the dead, that he may be the first in everything, for in this human being, God was pleased to let fullness of divinity dwell.

So together as those first Christians, we struggle with who is Jesus. I find it's very strange in a way, that when we try to raise Jesus up as someone very special, which is what Paul was trying to do, in the church we choose a title which Jesus rejected. We want to make him a king. There was a time in his life after he had performed that extraordinary gift of giving bread and fish to thousands of people who were hungry in the desert - they wanted to come and make him king. Jesus said no and went into hiding because that was one thing he rejected, was to be made a king.

Even when he was on trial for his life, Pilate said, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus only would reply, "Well, that's what you say I am." He would not declare himself a king. So it is strange, isn't it, that we ourselves try to raise Jesus up somehow and show how different he is by making him a king.

It would be totally wrong, except that when Jesus did tell Pilate, "You say I'm a king," he went on to say, "But in a way I am, because I have a kingdom but it's not anything of this world. It's not like you think of 'king.' It's very different." We really can learn from Jesus as king if we understand what he means by it. There's a very dramatic example in the scriptures and the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus is with his disciples toward the end of his public life. After they listen to him preach and teach, watch him act, and watch him enter into the ordinary lives of ordinary people all the time, they're still thinking about [how] Jesus is going to restore, as they put it, "the kingdom to Israel." They think Jesus is going to try what David had done - bring all the chosen people

together, establish a kingdom that would be like the kingdom of David, that would be powerful, that would rule the world.

Jesus got very upset with those disciples because they were thinking in those terms. Two of them even, James and John, two of the special disciples, were arguing, and then coming to Jesus to say, "When you come into your kingdom, can we be at your right hand and your left hand, at the highest places in your kingdom?" Well, of course, when the other disciples, who were also looking to get ahead and have the higher places, heard about this, they were upset.

They were angry at James and John, so Jesus called them all together. He gave them a lesson which we have to try to take in also. He said to them, "Look! Among those who don't really know God, those in positions of power lord it over the others, but among you it cannot be that way. The one who is to rule, or the one who is to lead, must be the servant, the slave of all the rest." So for Jesus being a king meant only being a slave, giving yourself totally, out of love for others, and isn't that exactly what he was doing as he was dying on the cross?

He was giving us an example of unbounded, unconditioned, unlimited love because even there on the cross, he was reaching out to others. This person who knew he was guilty of horrendous crimes knew that perhaps he should be executed. Jesus turned to him and welcomes him, draws him in, this terrible sinner, really. Jesus says, "No, you're welcome in my kingdom." He gave his life for that person as he gives his life for every one of us.

We remember so well how Jesus, even as he's dying, tries to draw into his community the very ones putting him to death. He prays to God: "Forgive them. Forgive them, the ones who are executing me." Jesus is a king who totally upsets the whole idea that we have of kingship. His is a kingship of service, of love, of reaching out to others. Jesus came to establish what we call the reign of God.

By that he means what he proclaimed the first time he preached in the synagogue at Nazareth when he read from the book of the prophet Isaiah and proclaimed, "The spirit of god is upon me. God sent me to proclaim good news to the poor, to give the blind new sight, to heal the broken-hearted, set the downtrodden free" - that is, relieve the oppressed of all their oppression - "and to proclaim God's year of favor," the jubilee time, when all debts are forgiven, when everyone begins to share in what God has given for all, where there is joy, peace and fullness of life - the reign of God.

And can only come about, Jesus says, by giving ourselves to others, by sharing what we have, by reaching out to heal the broken-hearted, to set the downtrodden free. We have to be people who serve, and that's how Jesus was king and the only way he would accept being named a king. So as we celebrate this feast day, I hope we try to take in, as deeply as we can, what Jesus means when he says to Pilate: "You say I am a king, but my kingdom is not like any kingdom of this world; it's a kingdom where those who lead serve, are the slaves of all."

One final point as we reflect on Jesus as our king. I'm sure all of us, we get discouraged. As we keep on working to make justice happen, to change the world, transform our world into as close an image of the reign of God as possible, which is what disciples of Jesus are called to do - we get discouraged and wonder, "Is it ever going to happen?" Well, that happened to John the Baptist, one of the first people who was with Jesus in his public life.

John, when he was in prison, sent a messenger to Jesus and said, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we wait for another? Are you really the one who is going to make the reign of God happen, or are we going to wait for someone else?" Jesus sent word back to John, using words that he had proclaimed in that sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth.

He said, "Go and tell John what is happening right now - the blind seeing, the downtrodden are set free, those who are crippled begin to walk, those who are hungry are fed, and even the dead rise to new life. Go and tell John what is happening right now because I'm here."

And it was happening. John was impatient. He wanted it all to happen all at once. I think sometimes that's the way we are, so we too, if we want to avoid discouragement, giving up and trying to follow Jesus faithfully, we have to look around and find out [that] things are happening. The reign of God is breaking forth. I had a marvelous experience of that last weekend. I was in Columbus, Ga., at Fort Benning, one of our military bases. There, is located what we have called the "School of the Americas," a military school where our military train military from Latin America and Central America, train them how to torture and how to kill. It's a place that was responsible for training those who murdered Archbishop Oscar Romero, those who murdered the four women from our own country who were killed, those who murdered the six Jesuit priests and their two co-workers, all from the School of the Americas.

But last weekend, and this has gone on now for many years, there were thousands, thousands of young people, senior high school youngsters and college kids, who came because they are committed to change our world, to transform this world into as close an image of the reign of God as possible. It was inspiring to know that the message of Jesus is taking hold in young people in our country, and they're determined to change it.

They had workshops on global warming; they want to stop the destruction of our earth. They had workshops about war; they're going to stop violence and war. They had workshops on human trafficking - the selling of youngsters from Asia and Africa, to be brought into this country, to be trafficked in houses of prostitution. They're going to stop those things, and it was so inspiring to see all of these young people doing this, struggling to make our world a better place.

So if you get discouraged sometimes because it's hard to follow a king who says you must be a servant, think about those young people, but then also think about other things that you've come to know, where people are working to make the reign of God happen, and gradually it is going to happen.

Jesus will break forth and make happen in our world the fullness of God's reign, but we are called in the meantime, to continue to be with Jesus, to serve, to transform our world into as close an image of the reign of God as possible. So as we celebrate Jesus as our king, remember that we're celebrating one who was a servant, and that we too must be servants of all our brothers and sisters until the reign of God comes forth in its fullness.

[This homily was preached at St. Leo Parish in Detroit, Mich.]

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