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Jesus' kingly reign is of God, not of man

Thomas Gumbleton | Nov. 29, 2012 The Peace Pulpit

We reflect on the Gospel lesson this morning, which clearly proclaims what we are celebrating in our feast today: Jesus is a king. "For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is on the side of truth hears my voice." We want to hear that voice today -- Jesus teaching us about his kingship -- but I think it will help us if we first of all try to understand more deeply the first two lessons of today.

These lessons, as you heard -- one taken from the Book of Daniel and one taken from the Book of Revelation -- are lessons that come from a kind of literature that we call apocalyptic. This is a special kind of literature in the scriptures. The Book of Revelation is called the Book of the Apocalypse, and in the passage from Daniel, we have a passage that is clearly what we call apocalyptic. There are other places in Daniel and the other prophets where this kind of literature is given to us.

The Solemnity of Christ the King
Daniel 7:13-14
Psalms 93:1, 1-2, 5
Revelations 1:5-8
John 18:33b-37
Full text of the readings [1]

It's important to understand what this kind of literature is. It's the literature of crisis, of hope, and seemingly hopeless situations. It's the literature that provided for the chosen people and through the apocalypse that John provides for us, Jesus' followers, a message of hope in the time of crisis and the time of despair, where everything seemed to go wrong. In the passage from Daniel, it was written at a time when the chosen people had been subdued by a king called Antiochus IV.

With superior military forces, he terrorized the Jewish people to the point where many of them simply gave up and abandoned their religion, but others, under the leadership of the Macabee brothers, stoutly resisted, even though it was a losing battle. Daniel wrote at the time of Antiochus to reassure the people that ultimately, they would prevail. God would prevail through them. It's written in symbolic language.

Daniel uses the image of fierce animals to show how the chosen people are going to be subdued and destroyed; but then, as we hear in today's passage, Daniel foretells and sees in his vision one like a Son of Man, a human being coming on the clouds of heaven, unlike the beasts that had sprung from the sea, the mythological spawning place of evil. This human being is presented before the ancient one, the eternal God, who endows him with universal dominion, invincible kingship; not in the way of human kingdoms, but in a spiritual way, universal dominion over all creation.

It brings to mind what Jesus himself spoke about so often, the Reign of God, where God has dominion over all of creation. What we mean by that is the dynamic rule of God's love. This is proclaimed by Jesus. It is the realm of human persons embracing God's saving love made present in Jesus. The result of the Reign of God is fullness of life for every person, every part of creation being brought forth to its fullness as all of creation enters into this dynamic rule of God's saving love.

That's what Daniel is -- not predicting -- but we read or listen to the words of Daniel, and then in our second lesson today from the Book of the Apocalypse, we listen to that word as we reflect on who Jesus is. In that second lesson today, the visionary author sees a victory, sees Jesus as victorious amid the clouds, symbol of divine presence and power. In words borrowed, in fact, from Daniel, he portrays Jesus as claiming power over

those who tried to destroy him.

All of this is the work of God. That's what the author of that second lesson today is telling us: the God who is proclaimed rightly as alpha and omega, beginning and end, the one who is and who was and who is to come, that almighty God. These two passages from apocalyptic writers indicate who Jesus is. It's not a prediction, but simply a way of trying to understand Jesus as he proclaims what I just mentioned, the Reign of God, that dynamic rule of God's saving love that brings fullness of life, goodness, to every part of creation, including ourselves and the whole of the human race.

As we listen to these readings, then we listen to Jesus saying to Pilate, "Yes, I am a king. You have said it. I am a king," but it's so important for us to put it into the context of these readings, in the context of Jesus proclaiming that the Reign of God is at hand. We cannot think of Jesus in terms of what we ordinarily think of as king, ruler or someone who is dominant. Remember so often in the life of Jesus, he had to reject the idea of being king because the people totally misunderstand his message when he is proclaiming the Reign of God.

After the wonderful feeding of the multitude in the desert, they wanted to make Jesus king. Remember? Jesus hid himself. He went away and hid. He did not want to be a king in the sense that they thought of a king, someone who would just provide them with everything, who would make their life easy, someone who would dominate over them. No, Jesus was not that kind of king. Remember that last week of his life, before that passage in today's Gospel, when Jesus was entering Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday.

They were proclaiming him the king of Israel, the king of God's people. They were thinking in terms of David, that great warrior king, and if Jesus were to be that kind of king, he would have come riding into Jerusalem on a war horse with his soldiers with him, ready to overthrow the Roman Empire. That's what they were thinking of. Remember what Jesus did? There was an image in the Book of the Prophet Zechariah, a passage that talked about a king who was to come, riding on a donkey.

Jesus deliberately gives himself that demeanor, that image. He comes into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. He deliberately chose to do it that way: not a war horse; a simple donkey, the work animal of the poor. Jesus was not a king in any way that we would think of king and worldly kingdoms. He was here, as he said, to proclaim the Reign of God. He said it was at hand. At the beginning of Mark's Gospel, which we heard earlier this year, he said, "The Reign of God is at hand. Change your lives. Enter into that Reign."

Live according to the values of this Reign of God, and everything will be different, for you, for me and my personal life, each of us in our personal lives and for all people, for our world, if we can enter into this work of Jesus of transforming our world into the Reign of God. Jesus [said it] himself, when he spoke in the temple at Nazareth at the beginning of his public life. It's in Luke's Gospel.

"The spirit of God is upon me. God sends me to proclaim good news to the poor, to give the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim God's year of favor, the jubilee year," when everyone would share the goods of the earth that God gave for all, and not for a few, the beautiful time of the fullness of God's creation. Jesus said, "This day, this scripture passage is fulfilled, even as you listen."

He was speaking the words of Isaiah, but he's saying, The passage is fulfilled in me. This is what it means that I am a king. We transform our world into the Reign of God. There are many images that we could use to speak about the Reign of God. Those words from the Gospel of Luke certainly speak clearly about the Reign of God, when everyone is lifted up. The poor have the good news proclaimed. The downtrodden are set free, and so on.

Just a couple of weeks ago, at the Bishops' meeting in Washington, they passed a resolution that they were going to support the effort to have Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, who died back in 1980, to work for the declaration of her being a saint, one who we venerate and try to imitate. Dorothy Day

was one who, through her work with the Catholic Worker movement, was really showing us how the Reign of God is to be where everyone shares in the goods of all.

If we learn about her life and take it seriously, it will be a challenge to all of us. The week after the bishops made this determination that they were to work for her canonization, her being proclaimed a saint, I happened to be given a copy of a poem that appeared in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the main newspaper in the city of Pittsburgh. The poem was written by a woman named Ann Curran, and I think it's marvelous that this secular newspaper publishes this poem about Dorothy Day.

Listen to it carefully, and you'll get a sense of what Dorothy Day was doing to try to enter into the work of making the Reign of God happen: "Me and Dorothy Day meet for coffee and watery soup at a downtown five-and-dime lunch counter, me a cub reporter, she a wise woman. I know she picketed the White House, demanded the vote, went to jail, escaped with a presidential pardon. She left her lover for her religion. I know she started a string of houses of hospitality for the homeless and unemployed. They still have no vacancies in those houses.

"In her kitchen, she cooked up the radical *Catholic Worker*, a newspaper. She fought for peace, did penance for Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I know her church forgave her an abortion, but she never forgave herself. I know Notre Dame University gave her the Laetare Medal for 'Comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.' To me, she preaches her Gospel at the counter, the kind of place where the civil rights began.

"Yes, she worked that road, too. She fished her clothes from donation barrels, and today looks like a Scandinavian queen in a knit hat, sprinkled with silver bangles, a halo on one now rising toward sainthood. All I recall of our conversation, her words, 'That extra coat in your closet belongs to the person with none.' She left a mark on me that day. Every winter, I give away a coat, ashamed to own more than one at a time."

It's time to make the Reign of God happen, where everyone has a chance for a full human life, all share in the goods that God gave in God's creation for all and not for a few. There is the challenge for us. We recognize today Jesus as king, but not a king whose kingdom comes from this world. It's totally different. It's the Reign of God, the dynamic rule of God's saving love, the reign of human persons responding and embracing God's saving love made present in Jesus.

Yes, we call Jesus our king today, but if we're going to be authentic, we must enter into his work of making the kingdom happen, making the Reign of God happen where all of God's creation comes to its fullness and every human person has the opportunity for a full human life. If we can accept that challenge, then rightfully, we will proclaim Jesus today as our king forever.

[Homily given at St. Anne, Frankfort, Mich. The transcripts of Bishop Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. **Sign up here** [2] to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]

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