

Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ the King

Thomas Gumbleton | Nov. 30, 2006 The Peace Pulpit

We may not have adverted to it, but we should notice that the feast we celebrate today is unusual, even unique I would say, because it's a feast that celebrates one of the titles of Jesus. There's no other feast that does this. We could have, for example, a feast of Jesus the Prophet, or Jesus the Teacher, or Jesus the Shepherd, but we don't do that for reasons that are not totally clear, I guess. We chose the one title that Jesus rejected, and so it's a challenge to reflect on this feast and the scriptures that we have for this feast. And to have drawn forth this truth that is very important for us.

There is a kind of explanation for the feast. It was established very recently, relatively speaking, in the twentieth century. Most of our other feasts go back many, many centuries as part of our whole tradition. Not until 1925 did we have a feast for Christ the King. Pope Pius XI made the determination to put together this feast and spread it throughout the whole Catholic world. And undoubtedly, one of the reasons that he did this was because of what was happening in human history in that part of the 20th century. There was in Germany, the rise of Nazism, and exaggerated nationalism. There was the rising up of Communism, atheism, totalitarian governments that demanded total sovereignty over people, putting a nation or an ideology in place of God. That's what was happening. And so it could have been a very effective thing -- to remind all of the followers of Jesus, "Look, your nation isn't sovereign over you. No ideology can be sovereign over you. Only God can. Jesus is God and Jesus is sovereign over us."

People at the time of course did not heed this message. In Germany, the church itself acceded to Hitler's ideology. I'm not saying totally in any way, but in 1933 the Vatican signed a concordat with Hitler recognizing his regime, accepting it as legitimate and it had been voted upon by the people of Germany, who were Christian by a large majority, and who accepted this ideology -- glorified nationhood, the Fatherland above all. Communism was much more of a totalitarian system that was imposed upon people although there were those who believed in this atheistic ideology and tried to push it throughout the world. It's ironic in a way, I guess, that our present Holy Father, Joseph Ratzinger, as a teenager, following the directives of the church of his time, joined the Hitler Youth, became a Nazi soldier, fighting for the cause of Nazism. How ironic. How wrong. The church at the time simply failed to heed the message that only God can be sovereign over us!

We need to try to delve into this mystery somewhat even though as I mentioned before Jesus totally rejected the idea of his being a king. After one of his most extraordinary signs that he worked, when the thousands were fed in the desert, people wanted to make him king and he went into hiding because he refused to be king and all that it stood for in human history, even in the history of the Chosen People.

When Jesus stands before Pilate, as we hear in today's Gospel, -- "Are you a king?" -- Well, first he doesn't really answer. Pilate presses him. And so in a sense Jesus says, "Alright, you say it. I am a king." But then immediately he wants Pilate to know -- wants us to know -- not a king in the sense of anyone having

sovereignty over another, not a king with power, coercion, armies, wealth, prestige. No, Jesus only agrees to be called king according to the interpretation that he gives, "Yes, I'm a king, but the source of my being a king doesn't come from this world." He makes the obvious point, "Of course if I were a king like your king I would have an army. I wouldn't be a helpless person standing here bound in front of you. People would be fighting on my behalf, but I'm not that kind of a king. My kingdom does not come from this world. It's not out of this source. The only kind of reign I have is one that comes from God." And so therefore as Jesus defines his being a king, "I am a witness to the truth and if only you would hear my truth, the world could be changed. The reign of God could happen."

Of course he had preached about the reign of God, and the temple authorities had used that as a way of getting Pilate's attention. "He's calling himself a king. That's a threat to Caesar." So Pilate had to pay attention otherwise he would have dismissed the whole case very quickly. But when Jesus stands before Pilate, he says the kind of king he is -- according to the way of God. He rejects any historical notion, human notion, of being a king. For him, to rule is to serve. He's the servant of all.

As one who gives witness to the truth, Jesus reminds us that the only power God uses, and that he would use as king, is the power of truth, the power of love. That's what can change everything. Not violence. Not force. Not coercion. Love. Being the shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. Being the one who declares to his disciples, "Greater love than this no one has than to lay down your life for your friend. And you are my friend." So he's telling them, "I lay down my life for you." That's the kind of kingship Jesus exercises. Love . . . caring for people . . . reaching out to the poor and giving them their dignity and their worth.

Pilate had to have been challenged by Jesus when he said, "I'm here to testify to the truth." Was Pilate going to listen to him and accept this truth? He could have but instead he finds a way out of his dilemma. He knows Jesus isn't a threat to Caesar, but he doesn't want to simply let him go and then be reported to Caesar by the Jewish authorities so he makes that offer, "I'll let him go as the custom is to hand someone over at Passover," and those who reject the truth of Jesus say, "No! Crucify him!" Pilate had a chance to make a choice. He wouldn't do it and by not making a choice he really did make a choice -- he gave up Jesus to death.

But what's more important -- each of us, too, are confronted with this message of Jesus, "I am here to testify to the truth. I'm a witness to the truth, the truth of God, the truth that will make you free, the truth that will bring the reign of God into our world." Are we ready to accept that truth? That's the challenge to each one of us today. We raise up Jesus in glory in our Liturgy. We exalt Jesus. We praise Jesus. One of us who is Son of God in power. But it's this Jesus who says, "I'm a witness to the truth and those who hear my voice will follow me." So the question is: Do we hear Jesus? Do we accept his truth? Do we reject violence? Vengeance? Retribution? War? Or do we go along with all of those things, finding some way out as Pilate did, getting off the hook, as we would say? Or will we take the challenge and really follow Jesus? That's the only way we can celebrate this feast with any integrity, with any authenticity -- by saying yes to Jesus as Jesus declares who he is -- the one who reigns by serving, who become the slave of all, gives everything for others.

When each of us is ready to do that, we will begin to experience the reign of God in our own lives and the more that we do that as a whole community, the more we will begin to make the reign of God break forth more clearly, more fully in our world. And so today we must praise Jesus with this title of king, but we must do it according to his way, according to his teaching. And each of us must try to become a servant, slave even, of others, doing all out of love for others as Jesus did. Do it in our individual lives, do it in our families, do it here in our parish community and try to spread this message in our society so that as a nation we change and help to bring about the true reign of God which is a reign of justice, a reign of love, and finally, a reign of peace.

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