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What are we celebrating with today's feast? Some say that when Pope Pius XI established the feast of Christ the King in 1925, he wanted to combat secularism and also, some say, to remind the nations of Europe that even after losing its secular power, the Catholic Church remained more important than political realms. I once heard a preaching instructor say that this feast is the autumn version of Palm Sunday — a day when we sing “Hosanna to the Lord” whose message we tend to forget or forsake almost as soon as we leave the parade grounds. If we interpret the feast through the lens of the readings we hear today, we will understand it as a celebration of the God whose will is to draw us into sharing divine life.

This year, we turn to John's Gospel to lead us in our consideration of Christ the King. Here, we have the famous trial scene in which Pilate questions Jesus only to find that he himself is on trial about the meaning of his life.

Pilate asked Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Jesus didn't answer, at least not directly. Instead, Jesus interrogated Pilate about what he had at stake in the question. Today's celebration asks us as well what we have at stake in celebrating the feast the church calls “The Solemnity of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, King of the Universe.”

Spanish theologian Juan Mateos points out that Pilate's naming of Jesus as “King of the Jews” was very different from the Palm Sunday crowd's calling to him “King of Israel.” “King of the Jews” refers to the king of an ethnic group, a people bonded by political and blood ties. “King of Israel” places him in relation to the people God has gathered, recognizing him as the anointed leader of a people brought together by God's covenant offer.

When questioned by Pilate, Jesus didn't claim either title. Much to Pilate's confusion, Jesus admitted to being a king, but not in a realm that Pilate could comprehend. Pilate lived in a world of competition, fear and force. He would fear a king who could overthrow him like he feared the crowds who cowed him into doing their will. Pilate understood a world in which people must make their own importance known and felt, no matter how empty their claims to greatness. Pilate's is a world in which heredity, clothing, titles and the power to manipulate define a person's worth.

In contrast, Jesus had no need to cling to status. He knew why he was born and sent into the world. He claims that his only purpose in life was to testify to the truth.

Could anyone in history be freer than the man who says that? If being a king means that nothing and no one can constrain you, then Jesus is the King of Kings because he knows what he is about and no one can take that away.

Pilate had thought that he was dealing with a religious fanatic, or perhaps, as others alleged, a revolutionary. But, Pilate discovered that in Jesus he was facing the most powerful person he had ever met. Nothing Pilate could say or do, no bribe, no reward and no punishment could sway this man. Worse yet, he obviously had the power to influence others to imitate him.

Ultimately, that is the point of this feast. Those who choose Christ as their king, buy into his preaching about the reign of God. As king, Jesus defined his realm as one in which the greatest is the one who serves the most. In his realm, the strongest have no need of coercion because those who seek the truth about life will fall in love with him and stake their lives on the freedom he offers, being willing to forsake everything else for it.

The people who choose to belong to the realm of Christ the King know their primary identity comes from the God who loves us all. Their citizenship papers are the baptismal certificates that entrust them with the mission to live by and spread the values of God's realm. Because they see Christ as king of the universe, they assume care for all of creation as an integral part of their mission.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis gives us the 21st century version of the religious vision Pius XI was aiming at in establishing this feast. Francis calls us to be ready to put our life on the line, even to accepting martyrdom, in bearing witness to Jesus Christ, all for the purpose of bringing others to liberation (#24). This is the means to sharing divine life and the goal of all who wish to live in God's realm with Christ as their king.

## **DANIEL 7:13-14**

The church has chosen this selection from Daniel because it sees the Son of man depicted here as a reference to Christ. This short selection focuses on the climax of Daniel's fantastic dream/vision of wind-whipped seas out of which emerged four beasts representing successive empires that ruled over Israel and her neighbors. Although Daniel describes the beasts with horrible detail, they are ultimately nothing more than foils for the truly strong figures in the vision: the Ancient One and the one like a Son of man.

Daniel describes God as the Ancient One, a title that indicates that all creation is a recent phenomenon in comparison to God. Jewish mystical literature often refers to God as the Ancient One, giving readers an image of the divine, majestic sage. In a verse that our reading does not include (7:9), Daniel's Ancient One looks like an African elder, robed in white with hair like wool.

The highpoint of Daniel's vision is the appearance of "one like a Son of man." Even though he arrives on the clouds of heaven, this son of man is neither fearsome nor formidable, but there are some unnamed attendants who present him to the Ancient One. Unlike the scenes of Jesus' baptism and transfiguration, Daniel records no words, no interaction between the Son of man and the Ancient One. All we hear is that the Ancient One bestowed dominion, glory and kingship on the Son of man.

In ancient times, Nebuchadnezzar was said to have held power over all peoples, nations and languages. The Son of man receives all of that, but in addition, he receives what only God can give: an everlasting dominion that will never be taken away or destroyed. That is all the more impressive when we remember that he was a simple human being, a descendant of Adam and Eve. He might have fit Isaiah's description of the servant who had "no majestic bearing to catch our eye, no beauty to draw us to him." (Is 53:2). The person whom God favored and placed over the history of the world was no superhero, no angel, but a simple Son of man.

When the Book of Daniel was written, this vision offered hope to people bowed down under the cruelty and oppression of the Greek king, Antiochus Epiphanes. Whether they thought of the Son of man as a savior or a figure representing the revival of the entire people of God, he symbolized the promise of salvation and the assurance that God's love would not be overcome.

## **PSALMS 93:1-2, 5**

"The Lord is King!" That shout could be Israel's theme song. One commentary compares this psalm to a rousing cheer that summarizes the "Shema," Israel's prayer/proclamation of loyalty to God. Living among peoples who attributed divinity to the forces of nature and/or to the national leaders, Israel held an unshakeable belief in one, personal God who was beyond all human beings and their institutions. This was the God who had entered into a covenant relationship with them.

Of course, if the people personified God as a king, then it was natural for them to envision God as "robed in majesty." The Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, wrote one of the English language's loveliest descriptions of that majesty in his

poem, “God’s Grandeur.” The opening lines of the poem say:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil...

Like the psalmist, Hopkins encourages readers to become enraptured by what nature reveals about her creator.

The psalm verses we sing for the feast of Christ the King move us from objective praise of God to speak in direct address. After gratefully proclaiming that God has given us a stable world, we finish by telling God that we recognize that divine rule is even more secure than the foundations of the earth.

With our final stanza, we promise our loyalty to God, recognizing that everything that God asks of us is worthy of trust. The psalm as a whole is a joyful acclamation, a celebrative hymn that encourages us to remain faithful to our wondrous God.

## **REVELATION 1:5-8**

The introduction to the Book of Revelation in The Catholic Study Bible reminds us that we cannot understand Revelation outside of its historical context and its purpose as resistance literature. Judging Rome as the personification of the powers of evil, “John” encourages suffering Christians by reminding them that Christ has already won the decisive victory of history. Therefore, in spite of all that may be happening in a given moment, God’s plan is still being worked out among them. John says that he received that message from Jesus Christ who received it from the Father to pass on to humanity.

The opening line of our reading turns a greeting from Jesus Christ into a statement about him, anticipating the titles John will use to describe him. The title “Christ,” meaning God’s anointed one or messiah, is not new with John. The Book of Revelation was probably written around the year 96, by which time Paul and others had made Christ a common title for the risen Lord.

John goes on to speak of Jesus as the faithful witness, a description that has a double meaning in this context. First, Christ is the witness who reveals God. In addition, he is the one who bore witness to his mission before the authorities who executed him for what he proclaimed. His faithfulness was an encouragement to people who must bear witness in their own day. (Anyone who read this in the original Greek would have understood the implications of the fact that the word translated here as witness was *martus*, the root of the word “martyr.”)

The title “firstborn of the dead” may not have been new to John’s readers, but it was of utmost importance to people who were risking their lives for their faith. The Christian tradition reminded them that as “firstborn,” Christ would bring them to share eternal life with him. His resurrection was just the beginning.

Finally, although it may sound innocuous, the description of Jesus as “ruler of the kings of the earth” was revolutionary and could have been taken as seditious. That title went to the heart of the rationale behind the persecution of Christians. Because they would not recognize any God but the God of Jesus Christ, Jews saw the Christians as heretics and Romans believed they were anarchists who, by insulting Rome’s gods, could bring disaster on the entire empire.

The last line of today’s selection, the Lord’s self-description as the Alpha and Omega may be familiar but deserves consideration. Most Christians today see God as the ultimate source of life. Although theologians rarely pronounce on scientific details, most people are aware that mainline Christian theology has no quarrel with science. They recognize that the two deal with different dimensions of reality. Few believers have problems conceiving of Christ as the Alpha, no matter what they think about the evolution of the universe.

We may not have given as much thought to Christ as the end goal of all creation. In the mid-20th century Teilhard de Chardin brought thinking about Christ as the Omega to the fore in his theological writings. As a scientist, Teilhard was convinced that all of creation was in a process of what the Eastern tradition calls divinization. This idea goes at least as far back as Clement of Alexandria in the early third century who taught that God became human so that humans would

learn how to become God. Paul started that line of thinking by speaking of Christ bringing everything into God who will be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28).

This vision of all converging in the Omega is one more way of explaining what our apocalyptic Scriptures have been saying for two weeks. It all comes down to the conviction that no matter how much it appears that evil is winning, life originated in God and is destined to God.

## **JOHN 18:33b-37**

Today's Gospel comes from Jesus' trial before Pilate and focuses on Jesus as a king. In John 12:13, crowds acclaimed Jesus as he entered Jerusalem and cried out to him as the King of Israel. Even though it was a religious or theological title, the people had political aspirations for their messiah. What was difficult for them to remember was that if the messiah was sent by God, then his mission came from God, not from the agenda of his people. Everything about Jesus as the king of Israel was therefore a revelation of God's will.

In today's Gospel scene, Pilate asks Jesus if he is the King of the Jews. The difference between being the King of Israel or King of the Jews is that the Jews were a people like any other, defined by ethnicity, not by covenant. It is no surprise that Pilate doesn't understand the implications of his question nor that Jesus avoids answering it.

Instead, Jesus questions Pilate: Is he asking for himself or as a matter of trial evidence? Pilate retorts that he is no insider to Jewish thinking. He claims that he is a civil leader whose task is to keep peace and eliminate threats to political stability. Thus, he seems genuinely curious when he asks, "What have you done?"

Jesus responds that his kingdom is unimaginable in Pilate's world. Pilate lives in the world of winner-take-all. Jesus says that if he were a part of that world, his followers would rise up and he would never fall into the power of apostates of foreigners.

Pilate then takes the conversation back to his world of thought: "You are a king?" Jesus' response, grammatically difficult to translate, affirms: "You are saying that. I am royal." The point is that Jesus does not exactly say he is "the king," but admits to a kind of royalty that is not exclusive, territorial, coercive, or in any other way understandable on Pilate's terms.

There seem to be two interrelated challenges for us who would celebrate this feast. If we call Christ a king, we must remember that his title comes from God's realm. Thus, he will not fit our models nor act on our agenda. Secondly, claiming Christ as king calls us to live the values of his realm, redefining power and greatness and learning from him how to be free enough to give all we are.

If we celebrate this feast as an autumn version of Palm Sunday, every "Glory to God" and "Hosanna" we sing demands a recommitment to carry out our baptismal promises.

# **Planning: Christ the King**

**By: Lawrence Mick**

Today is the last Sunday of the liturgical year, the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, to give it its full title in the Missal. Prayer texts for this celebration are placed in the Missal after the 34th week in Ordinary Time at the end of the section titled "The Solemnities of the Lord." In the Lectionary, the readings are found right where you'd expect them — after the 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Celebrating this feast is always a little tricky, and it may be even more of a challenge after observing the World Day of the Poor last week. It is difficult for us to properly understand Christ's kingship, because our images of kings don't really fit. Pope Francis alluded to this in his 2017 message inaugurating the World Day of the Poor: "The kingship of Christ is most evident on Golgotha, when the Innocent One, nailed to the cross, poor, naked and stripped of everything, incarnates and reveals the fullness of God's love. Jesus' complete abandonment to the Father expresses his utter poverty and reveals

the power of the Love that awakens him to new life on the day of the Resurrection” (Nov. 19, 2017; #7).

That’s a good quote to keep in mind as you plan the liturgies for this weekend. This is not a day of pomp and triumphalism, viewing Christ as the most powerful of all worldly kings. It is a day to recognize and remember that our king reigned from a cross, not a throne, crowned with thorns, not gold and jewels. What may seem like a feast exalting Christ’s power actually celebrates his powerlessness and poverty in contrast to the powers of society.

The readings today reflect this contrast. The first reading portrays Christ receiving “dominion, glory, and kingship.” The responsorial psalm describes his strength and splendor. The second reading offers him “glory and power forever and ever,” but it also reminds us that he was pierced and “has freed us from our sins by his blood.” The Gospel fleshes out that truth as Jesus is questioned by Pilate and insists that his kingdom is not of this world. Perhaps it would be good for planners to read these texts in reverse order. It is only through his acceptance of powerlessness and suffering that Christ comes to his exaltation.

Keep this perspective in mind as you choose hymns and prepare intercessions for this feast. It is a day to celebrate wholeheartedly, but that only makes sense if we remember who our king really is and how he came into his glory. Recall the opening antiphon on Holy Thursday, “We should glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is our salvation, life and resurrection, through whom we are saved and delivered.”

## Prayers: Christ the King

By: Peg Ekerdt

### Introduction

As the liturgical year draws to a close, the church includes yearly warning that this life on earth is transient, a trial run for all eternity. We are reminded that Jesus is not the king of nation states, but a servant who comes to redeem and inspire all humanity. He is a shepherd, a ruler of human hearts, and a king of truth and justice. Is this the year we will finally pay attention, surrender our dependence on temporal success and respond with the witness of our faithful lives?

### Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you are the Alpha and the Omega, Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you are king of truth and justice, Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, call us to new life, Lord have mercy.

### Prayer of the Faithful

**Presider** Let us pray for the needs of the church, and for our world.

**Minister** As this church year ends, may we live so that the Lord will recognize us when he comes, for courage to be beacons of light and people of justice, we pray,

- For world leaders, for miracles of collaboration that they may see in the migrant and the refugee not a problem to be solved but brothers and sisters to be welcomed, respected and loved, we pray,
- For safe travel for those who return home or back to college on this Thanksgiving weekend, with gratitude for the bonds of family and friendship that have brought us together, we pray,
- On this week when people gather at tables of every kind to share a meal, we pray for farmers who grow the food that feeds our nation, for domestic cooks who nourish us in body and in soul, for chefs and all who work in the service industry, we pray,
- For those who go hungry in the midst of a nation’s wealth, for change that ensures human dignity, for generosity to share the gifts God has freely given, we pray,

- For the sick and all who are in medical treatment, for those who face addiction, depression or live with mental illness and for families who love them, we pray,
- For those who have died in the past week, and for all of our beloved dead, we pray,

**Prsider** Loving God, the Alpha and Omega, fill us with a greater desire to bring your kingdom to this Earth. Mold our hearts, sharpen our senses to hear your voice and fill us with your wisdom and grace. Help us create a world where truth and justice find a home. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

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