

CHRIST THE KING (November 21, 2021)

We come to the end of another Church year on this feast of the kingship of Jesus Christ. The Church established this feast back in the 1920's when Hitler in Germany and Lenin and Stalin in Russia were pushing their deadly ideologies of Nazism and communism respectively. In addition to trying to establish their own dictatorships, they also worked feverishly and we could say demonically to destroy the Church and the Christian faith altogether. That is why the Church established this feast—to remind the world that Jesus, through his death and resurrection, has established his kingship that will last forever. And it is a kingship that nothing or no one can or will destroy. The prophet Daniel and the book of Revelation (our first two readings) also remind us that this King will come again in the fullness of his divine majesty and glory for the Last Judgment as we spoke of last weekend.

The gospel today, however, reminds us of another dimension of Christ's kingship. We hear from St. John's account of the Passion (which we hear every year on Good Friday) where Pontius Pilate was trying to figure out this Jesus person. He asked "are you the king of the Jews?", obviously thinking in terms of an earthly kingship. Jesus replied that his kingship is not of this world; rather, he came 'to testify to the truth'—the truth about himself, about who and what we are made for, and how we are to live so we can attain the eternal life for which God made us in the first place. Elsewhere in John's gospel, Jesus made equally bold claims—"I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6), and "If you live according to my teaching, ...then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31).

There it is, and with startling clarity: the kingship, the authority and the centrality of Jesus Christ is founded on the truth that he teaches and—even more so—the truth that he is. Jesus is the Son of God, the one and only Savior of the world. He died on the Cross and rose from the dead so that we might have eternal life. He calls us to change our sinful and selfish ways and to love God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves. He calls us to this conversion and to accept this gift of salvation, but he doesn't force it on us against our will. This is indeed truth. Truth is that which is real, what corresponds to fact and reality—it is not simply our own perceptions or our own preferences which are so often misguided and even dangerously harmful. A quick look at the headlines and at the messiness of human history confirms that reality.

So how is it that anyone would reject or call into question the truth of Jesus Christ and the truths he taught and that he entrusted to the Church he founded on the rock of St. Peter? One example comes from some years ago when the priest abuse scandal was in all the headlines. I remember reading a letter to the editor on the subject which said in part: "What a bunch of hypocrites the leaders of the Catholic Church have turned out to be. They always lead you to believe they were above the rest of us, but...they were just ordinary people...Formal religion is the scourge of the earth."

Now, I have to confess that such sentiments got my dander up, and the former lawyer and high-school debater in me was tempted to respond point by point (probably not much of a surprise to you...). Regarding the comment about what hypocrites the church leaders were, I couldn't help but think about the guy who told the priest that he doesn't go to Mass anymore because they are

nothing but a bunch of hypocrites there. The priest replied: “don’t let that stop you; there is always room for one more!” In other words: we are here **not** because we are perfect saints, but precisely because we are **not**. We are here because we are sinners in need of the mercy of God; we are works in progress (and we all have a way to go!), but we also thank God for the gift of his mercy that we receive through his Son our Savior and King.

But my main response: what an utterly sad letter. This person was obviously very angry and bitter about those priest scandals and how some bishops did a very poor job in handling them. The truth is: there was and is plenty to be angry and disgusted about. Jesus taught us truth and he is indeed the truth as he clearly claimed. The problem, the scandal comes when we who call ourselves Christian and followers of Jesus—whether priest, lay person or anyone else—do not measure up to his teaching; in other words, when we become hypocrites. Formal religion in general and Christianity in particular is **not** the ‘scourge of the earth’. Rather, sin—the failure to fully live that faith—is the scourge.

Do we live and act and conduct ourselves as people who accept and rejoice in the kingship of Christ, or do we not? Do others see and hear us as grateful and joy-filled followers of Jesus, or do they not? As Catholic Christians, we have been given the fullness of the truth that Jesus Christ is and that he teaches—and what a priceless gift and privilege that is! But if the name ‘Christian’ doesn’t in fact correspond to how we conduct ourselves ‘out there’ in the office, at home, at school, on the roads or on the internet or social media, then others will notice that disconnect—just as we are so easy and quick to notice such a disconnect in others. Friedrich Nietzsche, a famous 19th-century philosopher and atheist, once said “if Christians want me to believe in their redeemer, they need to look more redeemed.” That is right on target—not bad for an atheist, right?? It’s a powerful and sobering examination of conscience—one that would be well for every single one of us to think about on a regular basis.

Being Christian, being Catholic in name only or only because that is how we were raised, is not enough. It never has been and it never will be. Let’s desire to learn more about Christ and what it means for him to be our King. Let’s foster our love for Jesus by spending time with him in prayer and reading his words and those of others in the Bible. Let’s resolve to make more regular use of the great sacrament of confession/reconciliation—recognizing and being honest about those aspects of Christ’s kingship that are hidden by our sins and selfishness. Speaking of which: there will be plenty of extra opportunities for confession during the season of Advent that begins next Sunday. I’ll also have further background on this powerful sacrament in my bulletin column during Advent. Learn Christ, love Christ, live Christ. In that way we help to further and advance his kingship, and others just may be inspired and challenged by our example. How blessed we are to be offered that opportunity; God grant us the desire and the grace to live up to that challenge.