

CHRIST THE KING – C (November 20, 2022)

First, a brief commercial announcement: my bulletin column is longer than usual this week (lots going on these days...), but I ask that you give special notice to a special event to be held at St. Michael's Church in Nashua on December 15. This is connected to the worldwide Synod of bishops meeting to be held in Rome next October; to prepare for that meeting, Archbishop Jackels invites you to take part in a local discussion on what should be recommended to the Holy Father for consideration at that synod next year. These local discussions will be held throughout our archdiocese; Nashua will be the site for our local deanery. For details, see the third item in my column. [end of commercial...]

It's very interesting to see how we Americans are so fascinated by royalty, especially when our nation was founded on the desire to be freed from the power of the king of England at the time of the American Revolution. The recent death of Queen Elizabeth II after her extraordinarily long reign of 70 years captured all the headlines and our attention, and news about the royal family in general—scandalous or otherwise—garners much attention. Even the language of royalty pervades our culture: John Wayne was 'the Duke', Aretha Franklin was the 'queen of soul', and Elvis was and remains 'the king'.

On this last Sunday of the church year we face these ideas and images of royalty on this feast of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe. The idea of kingship or royalty in general has been around throughout the millennia of human history. That was certainly true of God's chosen people throughout Old Testament times; our first reading, e.g., tells of David being anointed as king of Israel.

During his earthly life, Jesus hardly appeared as king in any typical way—especially when it came to his suffering and death. St. Luke in today's gospel gives us an astonishing vision of kingship. Jesus' throne? A rough wooden post to which he was nailed through his wrists and feet. His crown? A circlet of razor-sharp thorns that pierced his scalp if not also his skull. His scepter? A reed that was also used to beat him and humiliate him. The inscription on the cross—"this is the King of the Jews"—was intended not for respect but rather for mockery.

What a strange kind of kingship! What's going on here? A brief review of history may be helpful. This feast of Christ the King is of relatively recent origin; it was introduced into the church calendar by Pope Pius XI in 1925. He did so because he accurately read the signs of the times. By the early 20th century and for a variety of reasons, the whole idea of faith in God in general and the person of Jesus Christ in particular were seen more and more as irrelevant and of no account or importance. At the same time, the world was still emerging from the horrors of World War I during which millions were killed in battles between nations which for the most part called themselves "Christian". The bottom line: Jesus and his gospel were increasingly seen as having little or no connection to the secular world. Pope Pius was inspired to remind the world that Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Son of God, is and must be King in all aspects of life—individual and social.

Pope St. John Paul II made the same powerful point on this feast of Christ the King in a parish in Rome back in 1989. In his homily he referenced Jesus' promise of paradise to the 'good thief';

then he said: “Rome, the modern metropolis that is threatened by religious indifference, distracted by consumeristic prosperity, disoriented by moral relativism, afflicted by so many forms of ...poverty, needs to hear this new announcement of salvation.” Those words are fitting not only for Rome, but also for Washington DC, Chicago, Des Moines, and everywhere else—urban and rural. The pope referred to:

--‘religious indifference’—the idea that God and religion has no meaning or relevance in our so-called ‘modern’ world; who can deny the pervasiveness of that attitude these days?

--‘consumerist prosperity’—the idea that money is the prime meaning and goal in life; the recent collapse of FTX and concerns involving bitcoin and other new ways of wealth transfer show how fragile is the illusion of material wealth as a solid foundation for meaning in life...especially when human greed and corruption take charge as they so often do.

St. John Paul II nailed it. He reminds us as St. Paul reminds us in the second reading that Jesus Christ is the centerpiece of history and indeed of the universe and all creation: “He is the image of the invisible God...He is before all things...He is the head of the body, the church”. Christ is infinitely more than our friend; he is that, but infinitely more. He is Lord, Savior, messiah, and King. And so we owe him our full obedience, love and fidelity—not just during one hour a weekend at Mass, but in all we are and do at home, work, with family or friends...and everywhere else.

Back for a moment to Pope Pius XI who established this feast of Christ the King—in doing so, he said: “When once people recognize both in private and in public life that Christ is King, society will at last receive the great blessings of real liberty, well-ordered discipline, peace and harmony...[and] men will become more and more conscious of the link that binds them together.” That sound highly idealistic, doesn’t it? How can or will that ever happen?? I have no idea. The Church certainly cannot force the rest of the world to embrace Christ and accept his kingship; the last 2000 years give more than enough evidence of the futility of wars or attempted conquest with a supposedly ‘Christian’ purpose or façade.

But the pope was correct: all those blessings he mentioned will happen only when Christ’s kingship is accepted by all. And that is because the crucified and risen Jesus and he alone is God the Son, the King of the Universe, and the one and only way, truth and life. This will happen in God’s time and according to his purpose, but Jesus calls us to do our own part in this saving work. We do this by his grace and through our ongoing conversion and living more and more in grateful and dedicated obedience to him and his word—even and especially when it leads to inconvenience, suffering, or worse.

This coming Wednesday, November 23, the Church celebrates the feast of Blessed Miguel Pro, a Mexican priest who was killed by government forces in 1927 during the fierce persecution of the Church going on there at that time. On the day of his execution, Fr. Miguel stood in front of the firing squad with his arms stretched out in the form of a cross, a crucifix in one hand and a rosary in the other. When the order to shoot was given, he cried out “Viva Christo Rey!”—“long live Christ the King!” He was then shot dead. Blessed Miguel, please pray for us that we will have your courageous faith to joyfully proclaim and live the kingship of Christ in all that we are and all that we do.