

Christ the King

Someone asked why we have a feast proclaiming the Lord Jesus as King, since the Lord was anything but a king in his days on earth. A king is someone who has great worldly power, someone who commands armies, and Jesus had nothing of that. However, when we look at the Gospel, we have to admit that this title was applied to him during his lifetime. For instance, in John's Gospel (6) after Jesus feeds 5000 people with five barley loaves and two fish, the people want to make him their king, but Jesus withdraws to the mountain alone. He does not want to be their king. Then in the trial scene before Pilate, Pilate asks Jesus: "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus answers: "You have said so." But he will not say anything else when the chief priests and elders accuse him. Of what? Of being a king, it would seem, In the sentencing scene in Mark's Gospel Pilate again refers to Jesus as the King of the Jews. Then there is the inscription on the cross (Jesus, king of the Jews) which identified the charge brought against Jesus, that he was the king of the Jews. Clearly, then, we have to admit that according to the Gospels, Jesus was executed by the Romans as a seditious king, as someone attempting to set himself up against the Roman authority. That was the charge his own people brought against him so that the Romans would remove him. Yes, the Gospel describe

Jesus as a king, but as someone who refused to identify himself as such and was made such only by those who wished to have him executed. And that is why the question remains: Why have a feast dedicated to Christ the King?

But the answer to that question, at least for us who believe in Jesus as the Son of God made flesh, as the Word of God made flesh, is clear. Of course he is a king. No, not an earthy king, but a king in the sense of being one with God himself. You can't get more kingly than that. And he is the king of our hearts since we put him first in our affections and try to center everything in our lives on him. As that hymn says: The king of love my shepherd is. You know, when we try to describe someone or something that is important, we use many words and images and titles. Therefore, to call Jesus king is just one way of describing what he means to us.

Historically, this feast is relatively new. It was established by Pius XI who was pope from 1922 to 1939. He saw the world as becoming more and more irreligious. Society in his day was being organized in such a way that God was being totally excluded. For instance, he was watching the rise of Hitler in Germany, and he lived in a Italy controlled by Mussolini. Thus he was saying to that new kind of world: You are mistaken when you try to organize

society by excluding religion, by excluding the one we recognize as the Son of God and therefore as the king of the universe.

The feast has been placed at the end of the church year. Thus the Gospel chosen for it is that of the Last Judgment when the Son of Man will separate the sheep and the goats. And here we are taught that the criterion used in this separation will be our charity towards those whom we should recognize as Jesus' disciples. When the Lord sent out his disciples, he told them that those who received them would be receiving him, and those who rejected them would be rejecting him, for his disciples and he were one. That applies to this scene too. Jesus is here teaching us that he is one with those most in need. Therefore, if we don't help those who need our help, we are refusing to help the Lord himself.

This scene and the morality it embraces have been and continue to be the source of our lives. We live as we do because we try to meet the Lord in the least of his brethren, in those who are hungry, naked, sick, in prison, strangers. And we can do that because we know the Lord who is our king is also our shepherd and cares for us. Having been cared for, we can then care for others. Did you ever hear the phrase to pay forward? The reality, if not the actual phrase, can be found in a letter of Benjamin Franklin who didn't

want a person to pay him back what he had lent him but to pay him forward, that is, to do for another person what Franklin had done for him, lend him money. So we, having been received by Christ and by others as his disciples, must now pass this reception on to others. We must do for others what has been done for us. That is to pay forward. Let us do a lot of paying forward so that when we meet the Lord on our last day he will pay us back a hundredfold.