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The King Who Did Not Bow Down

Biblical Reflection for Solemnity of Christ the King

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TORONTO, NOV. 18, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- The liturgical year ends with the Solemnity of Christ the King. In John's poignant trial scene of Pilate and Jesus (18:33-37), we see a great contrast between power and powerlessness.

In coming to the Romans to ensure that Jesus would be crucified, the Jewish authorities fulfilled his prophecy that he would be exalted (John 3:14; 12:32-33). Pilate asks Jesus: "Are you the King of the Jews?" (v 33). The accused prepares his answer with a previous question, which provokes the Roman official: "Do you ask this on your own or did others tell you about me?" (v 34).

Pilate's arrogance does not intimidate Jesus, who then gives his own answer in the well-known words: "My kingdom is not from this world" (v 36). At once, Jesus gives the reason: "My kingdom does not use coercion, it is not imposed." Jesus reiterates his point: "My kingdom is not from this world."

Pilate is very astute. He does not see in Jesus' answer a denial of his kingship. In fact, Pilate infers and insists: "So you are a king" (v 37). Jesus accepts his claim without hesitation: "You say that I am a king. For this I came into the world."

For what? To inaugurate a world of peace and fellowship, of justice and respect for other people's rights, of love for God and for one another. This is the kingdom that penetrates our human history, illuminating it and leading it beyond itself, a kingdom that will have no end. When we pray the Our Father, we pray for this kingdom to come in its fullness.

In this Gospel scene, Pilate reveals himself as a deeply perplexed leader as he encounters one who is Truth. What is there of Pilate inside of each of us? What prevents us from being free? What are our fears? What are our labels? What costumes and masks are we wearing in public and really don't care to jeopardize? What is our capacity for neglecting and trampling on others for the sake of keeping up appearances, maintaining the façade, or the important job, or people's good opinion with regard to our respectability, our reputation or good name?

The Kingdom of Jesus

In the Fourth Gospel, the focus is on the kingship of Christ. The core of Jesus' message is the kingdom of God, and the God of Jesus Christ is the God of the kingdom, the one who has a word and an involvement in human history from which the image of the kingdom is taken. In the kingdom of Jesus, there is no distance between what is religious and temporal, but rather between domination and service.

Jesus' kingdom is unlike the one that Pilate knows and is willingly or unwillingly part of. Pilate's kingdom,

ZENIT

and for that matter the Roman kingdom, was one of arbitrariness, privileges, domination and occupation. Jesus' kingdom is built on love, justice and peace.

Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God, the kingdom of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace. This kingdom is God's final aim and purpose in everything he has done from the beginning. It is his final act of liberation and salvation. Jesus speaks of this kingdom as a future reality, but a reality that is mysteriously already present in his being, his actions and words and in his personal destiny.

If today's solemnity of Christ the King upsets some of us, is it not due to our own disillusionment of earthly kings and leaders, rather than the kingship of Jesus? The kingship and leadership of God's Son refuses rank and privilege, and any attempt to be master of the world. In him there is no lust, greed and ambition for power. He, the innocent king who executes no one, is himself executed. His reign completely overturns our notions of earthly kingship. His is a kingship of ultimate service, even to the point of laying down his life for others.

In John's Gospel, Jesus goes to his death as a king. The crucifixion is Jesus' enthronement, the ultimate expression of royal service. Because of Christ, the coronation of suffering is no longer death, but rather eternal life. Very few can measure up to Jesus' kingly stature, remaining powerless in the face of the powerful. Many of us resist with power, even though we resort to very refined forms of pressure and manipulation. Jesus never responded to violence with more violence.

Two crowns

The solemnity of Christ the King has had particular significance for me since I lived at Ecce Homo Convent, the Sisters of Sion Center on the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem's Old City during the years of my graduate studies in Scripture. The whole complex is built over what is believed to be Pontius Pilate's judgment hall, the setting for today's striking Gospel scene between Jesus and Pontius Pilate.

The holy sites in Jerusalem, which commemorate events in the life, passion and death of Jesus, often have two feasts throughout the year, feasts that remember the joyful and sorrowful aspects of Jesus' life. Ecce Homo Center's "patronal" feasts are the joyful solemnity of Christ the King at the end of the liturgical year, and the sorrowful feast of Jesus crowned with thorns on the first Friday of Lent.

Two feasts, two crowns, two images of Jesus the Lord set before the Christian community to ponder and imitate.

The feast of Christ the King presents us with the image of Christ crowned -- first with thorns, then with the victor's laurel hat, the evergreen crown of glory. On the day of our baptism, the crown of our head was smeared with the holy oil of chrism, that royal oil that makes us another Christos, another Anointed One. We have the power to live faithfully and love fiercely as Jesus did. The crown of glory -- Christ's very own -- is promised to each of us. Which crown is found at the center of our faith and our proclamation?

Who, if not the condemned Savior?

Jesus answered the Roman governor's questions by declaring that he was a king, but not of this world (cf. John 18: 36). He did not come to rule over peoples and territories, but to set people free from the slavery of sin and to reconcile them with God. He states: "For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice" (John 18: 37).

What is this "truth" that Christ came into the world to witness to? The whole of his life reveals that God is love: So this is the truth to which he witnessed to the full with the sacrifice of his own life on Calvary. Jesus

ZENIT

established the kingdom of God once and for all from the cross. The way to reach this goal is long and admits of no short cuts: Indeed, every person must freely accept the truth of God's love.

God is Love and Truth, and neither Love nor Truth are ever imposed. They stand gently knocking at the doors of our minds and hearts, waiting for us to open the door and welcome them. Yet so often we are afraid to usher in such guests into our lives and earthly kingdoms because of the serious implications associated with such gifts. Many of us resist the truth with power, while others will resort to very refined forms of pressure and manipulation to keep the Truth at bay.

As we contemplate Christ crucified, we understand something of why Christ has remained a king even up to modern times: He didn't bow down. He who was Truth incarnate never imposed himself on others. He stood, waited and knocked. He never responded to violence with more violence.

At the conclusion of the Stations of the Cross at Rome's Coliseum on Good Friday night in the Jubilee Year 2000, Pope John Paul II spoke these moving words: "Who, if not the condemned Savior, can fully understand the pain of those unjustly condemned?"

"Who, if not the King scorned and humiliated, can meet the expectations of the countless men and women who live without hope or dignity?"

"Who, if not the crucified Son of God, can know the sorrow and loneliness of so many lives shattered and without a future?"

Jesus took his wounds to heaven, and there is a place in heaven for our wounds because our king bears his in glory.

On this last Sunday of the liturgical year, our Crucified King hangs in our midst, arms outstretched in loving mercy and welcome. May we have the courage to ask him to remember us in his kingdom, the grace to imitate him in our own earthly kingdoms, and the wisdom to welcome him when he stands knocking at the doors of our lives and hearts.

[The readings for the solemnity of Christ the King are Deuteronomy 7:13-14; Revelations 1:5-8; and John 18:33b-37]

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