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This Is Hardly the Stuff of Kingship ... Or Is It?

Biblical Reflection for Solemnity of Christ the King, Year C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, NOV. 16, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Today's solemn feast of Christ the King, the grand finale to Liturgical Year C, gives us an opportunity to lay aside a lot of cultural baggage about kings and kingdoms, and discover how Jesus Christ can be a true king, unlike earthly rulers.

Over the past year, we have seen the important Lukan theme of the imitation of Jesus, especially in his ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation. In Luke's moving Gospel story of the crucifixion, this theme reaches its apex.

Jesus' final moments

Today's Gospel (23:35-43) is recounted only by Luke. The penitent sinner receives salvation through the crucified Jesus. Luke's moving scene of the crucifixion is filled with details typical of his portrayal of Jesus. He is crucified with the two criminals surrounding him, fulfilling Jesus' own prediction at the supper table (23:37). Just as Jesus had repeatedly taught his disciples not to respond to violence with more violence and to be forgiving, so he forgives the very men who had condemned him and who drive the stakes into his body (23:34).

When one of the crucified criminals joins in the chorus of derision that accompanies Jesus to his death, the other confesses his sin and asks for mercy (23:39-43). It is Luke's prescription for authentic conversion as exemplified in the story of publican and the sinner (18:9-14) and so Jesus promises this man not only forgiveness but also a place at his side that very day as his journey to God triumphantly reaches its home in paradise.

Only Luke describes this poignant scene (23:39-43): One of the criminals who hung alongside Christ derided him, saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked the other criminal, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." This one then said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Christ replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

The image of the dying Jesus jars us with such a sense of shame and powerlessness in Luke, who describes the death of the Son of God, the King of the Jews. Luke gives us a lexicon of abuse and humiliation: criminals, condemnation, crucifixion, nakedness, scoffing, mocking, taunting, deriding, reviling, sneering ... hardly the stuff of kingship, and no crowns here except one of thorns. We are face-to-face with agony and grief, and a cacophony of insults instead of songs and praise.

A kingship that embraces

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Kingship, when God is involved, does not ask people to ignore the failures, but embraces those experiences and redeems them. Throughout salvation history, God's promise to the people was a king who is righteous, deals wisely, executes justice and righteousness in the land, and enables the people to live securely. In Jesus, God has fulfilled that promise.

In the story of Jesus, kingship is recast. The miracle lies in the fact that God shares the potential hopelessness of the human situation, but does so as king, as the source of our hope and life. That is what the criminal on the cross with Jesus in today's Gospel scene (23:35-43) partly grasped. He asked Jesus to remember him when he came into his kingdom. He was looking to a future reign, but Jesus handed out the royal pardon immediately. This was simply the culmination of the way Jesus lived: He never dressed as we think a king should, or did things properly by our standards. Jesus' kingdom is unlike the one that Pilate knows and is willingly or unwillingly part of. The Roman kingdom was one of arbitrariness, privileges, domination, vengeance, vindictiveness, and occupation. Jesus' kingdom is built on love, service, justice, reconciliation and peace.

Very few can measure up to Christ's 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. 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 never responded to violence with more violence. He forgave until the end.

God's agent in history

Today's second reading from Paul's letter to the Colossians (1:12-20) is a summary about redemption by God the Father. The imagery echoes the Exodus experience and Jesus' theme of the kingdom. Redemption in this text is explained as forgiveness of sins (cf. Acts 2:38; Romans 3:24-25; Ephesians 1:7).

The lines of this reading are most likely an early Christian hymn, known to the Colossians and taken up into the letter from liturgical use. They present Christ as the mediator of creation (1:15-18a) and of redemption (Colossians 1:18b-20). Christ (though not mentioned by name) is preeminent and supreme as God's agent in the creation of all things, as prior to all things.

There is a second, very important point at the heart of this section of Paul's letter to the Colossians. Pauline usage is to speak of the church as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Romans 12:4-5). Some think that the author of Colossians has inserted the reference to the church here so as to define "head of the body" in Paul's customary way. When Christ was raised by God as firstborn from the dead (cf. Acts 26:23; Rev 1:5), he was placed over the community, the church, that he had brought into being, but he is also indicated as crown of the whole new creation, over all things. His further role is to reconcile all things (Colossians 1:20) for God or possibly "to himself." The blood of his cross (20) is the most specific reference in the hymn to redemption through Christ's death, a central theme in Paul (cf. Colossians 2:14-15; 1 Corinthians 1:17, 18, 23).

The kingdom and the Church

As we celebrate the feast of Christ's kingship today, let me leave you with this one thought that has been on my mind for the past year in particular. If we follow the example of the prophets of ancient Israel who worked within the framework of the structures of the faith of God's people of their day, then we in our day cannot marginalize Christian revelation and its ecclesial transmission by proposing a non-Christian vision where misuse of the terminology "Kingdom or Reign of God" is a substitute for Jesus Christ and his Church. The Church is the necessary vehicle, and privileged instrument for us to encounter Jesus Christ, to receive his life through the sacraments, to hear his Word mediated through preaching and the interpretation of the Church, and to journey toward the fullness of the kingdom of heaven, which lies ahead of us.

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Jesus Christ is our great prophet. He is the only full revelation of God and he is the Lord and Savior of all men and women. We must be watchful and vigilant that the Christian terminology is never emptied of its theological meaning so as to be better integrated into a "vision" or a supposedly "new wisdom" of this age.

On this great feast, let us remember that Jesus took his wounds to heaven, and there is a place in heaven for our wounds because our king bears his in glory. Perhaps we need to cry out: "Where are you, God?" And today we are given the answer: God is hanging on a tree, in the broken body of a young man -- arms outstretched to embrace us, and gently asking us to climb up onto the cross with him, and look at the world from an entirely new perspective. Or perhaps we need to cry out for mercy, asking that he not forget us in the New Jerusalem: "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom."

And from the depth of our own darkness and shadows, we might have to pray with the Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus, "Stay with us, Lord, for it is almost evening and the day is far spent." Or maybe in the midst of our despair, we recognize the source of our hope and echo the words of Jesus, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

What a strange form of kingship Christ offers us today! May today's feast force us to remember the appalling fact of our salvation. When all around us seems to be darkness, destruction, night, and even death, let us never forget that we are not alone. In our midst hangs the Crucified One, arms outstretched in loving mercy and welcome. May we have the courage to ask our benevolent king to remember us in his kingdom, and the peace to know that paradise is already in our midst even when every external sign indicates darkness and death. This is abundant life on the Royal Road of the Cross.

[The readings for the solemnity of Christ the King are 2 Samuel 5:1-3; Colossians 1:12-20; Luke 23:35-43]

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