

24th November 2019 (Feast of Christ our King, Year C)

2 Samuel 5:1-3; Psalm 121(122):1-5; Colossians 1:12-20; Luke 23:35-43.

'Today you will be with me in paradise!'

We come to the end of another liturgical year; indeed, we have come to the end of another three-year liturgical cycle, and we very aptly conclude this pilgrimage looking at the image of the king sitting on his throne. We are invited to look upon the Christ on his cross at his moment of triumph!

The gospels were written at a time when kings and queens were a common feature in the political landscape. In order to understand the implications of the kingship of Christ, we need to place ourselves back in that milieu. The imagery does not work if we replace the image of Christ as king with the image of the modern constitutional monarch or president of the republic, certainly much less with that of a political dictator.

As can be seen from today's first reading, the king is chosen by God himself, he is God's anointed one! The king owned the land of his kingdom and his subjects were his servants and his slaves. Especially in a Greek context, the same term is used for both servants and slaves, and the servants depended totally on their master for their livelihood. God's anointed one ruled over his people and looked after them, like a shepherd looked after his sheep, while the subjects provided their monarch with food for his household and were ready to give up their life for their king.

This understanding underpinned the messianic expectation of the people of God. Especially at a time when Palestine was oppressed by the Greeks and the Romans, the people believed God would send his anointed one to relieve them from their oppression and rule over them in God's name, in the tradition of the great King David.

On his cross, Jesus proves that he is the true king who has come to save his people, not from temporary oppression, but for eternity. Those watching the crucifixion taunt Jesus, expecting a temporal salvation, but Jesus shows that he is the one who is in control of the situation as he forgives those who crucified him. The thief recognises Jesus as king, and understands true salvation. He simply asks: remember me in your kingdom. Jesus' redemption is immediate: *Today*, you will be with me in paradise. God's kingdom is not something in the distant future, but is lived by us *Today*!

Jesus is king, of a different type from those who wield temporal power. Earthly kings and queens are surrounded by an entourage of people at their service; Jesus is the one who serves. He is the one who leaves the dinner table, to go down on his knees, and wash his apostles' feet, an action that can be only asked of slaves. Jesus insists that he has come, not to be served, but to serve us. Moreover, while the king's servants were expected to be ready to die for their king, and monarchs had their own bodyguards to protect them from any assassination attempt, Jesus is the one who gives up his own life to save his disciples. Like a true shepherd, he does not look after the sheep for his own gain, to eat their flesh and drink their milk; he gives up his life for his sheep and gives them his body and blood as food and drink!

This is the king we follow, the king we are invited to hold up as the role model and to build our life on. Like Jesus, in our Baptism, we are anointed to share in his ministry as priest, prophet and king. We exercise our priestly ministry when we offer prayer and sacrifice to God; as prophets we speak and witness to God's word; and as kings we need to go down on our knees and be of service to those around us. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 786)

Pope Francis is living an excellent example of how to follow Christ the King in service. He teaches us to go out and serve the poor, reaches out to those who are vulnerable and less fortunate, sits at table with the poor and the homeless, teaches us that the poor save us!

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