

Homily for the Solemnity of Christ the King, Year C

November 20, 2022

St. Bavo Parish

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First Reading: 2 Samuel 5:1-3 (David is anointed King of Israel.)

Responsory: Psalm 122 (Let us go rejoicing to the house of the Lord.)

Second Reading: Colossians 1:12-20 (Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.)

Gospel: Luke 23:35-43 (Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.)

Today's first reading shows David being anointed as the new King of Israel. His predecessor, Saul, the first King of Israel, has just died in battle. Saul had been a capable military leader, but a bit of a disappointment as King, because of serious shortcomings in his character. In asking David to accept their allegiance, the people remind David of what God had said to him while Saul was pursuing him and trying to kill him. The Lord promised then that David would someday replace Saul, saying, "You shall *shepherd* my people Israel and shall be *commander* of Israel." This suggests that the Lord was calling David to a *twofold* mission as King. He was to be more than just a field general, who could lead troops into battle, as Saul did. God and the people also wanted David to be a *shepherd*, who cares for his people and leads them in the way of righteousness. David accepts this dual commission and serves his people well, leading them to peace, prosperity and security, but also to greater *holiness*.

Roughly one thousand years of history separated King David and Jesus Christ, the King whom we celebrate today. During that millennium, numerous prophecies seemed to promise a Messiah who would not only restore the Davidic line of rulers to Israel, but also embody the same spirit of a shepherd-king which made David a beloved and revered figure for all future generations of Jews. Jesus *was*, in fact, such a shepherd-king. But, his coronation would be unlike any other in history.

Today's reading from Luke's Gospel opens with Jesus mounted on his earthly "throne," namely, *the cross*. His "royal court" is not an exuberant gathering of admirers singing his praises and promising their allegiance to him, but an angry and belligerent crowd hurling insults at him. The Jewish religious leaders sneer at him, daring him to save himself and others if he really is the Christ of God, as his followers claim. The Roman soldiers also jeer at him, thinking him to be pathetic and weak, the very antithesis of what they expect from a leader. Even a common thief crucified next to Jesus has the audacity to revile him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself *and us*." Ironically, the placard above Jesus' head proclaims the truth: "This is the King of the Jews." But, it's intended as *sarcasm*, not prophecy. The point is to ridicule him as a fraud with delusions of grandeur, not to honor him as the true King, anointed by God.

As Jesus hangs on the cross – beaten, bloody, and painfully gasping for every breath – he certainly does not possess the stately bearing of a king. In this moment, there is nothing about him which even hints at the glory and power which rightfully belong to him. Yet, one person in this horrific scene recognizes Jesus for who he is. The "good thief" crucified on his other side rebukes his comrade, proclaims Jesus' innocence, and asks a favor, immortalized in

one of the most popular Holy Week chants: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” Knowing that he is about to exchange his earthly throne of wood and nails for a glorious throne in heaven, Jesus replies, “Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

St. Paul’s Letter to the Colossians paints a very different picture of Jesus than the pathetic, but strangely dignified, image of Jesus slowly dying on the cross. Paul describes Jesus as “the image of the invisible God.” He asserts that, “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Furthermore, “He is the head of the body, the church.” So, in Paul’s understanding, Christ is the one who holds together all things on earth and in heaven, and also the one who holds *all of us* together, reconciling us to one another and to God by the blood of his cross.

In stark contrast to Luke’s crucifixion scene, Paul is presenting us with a *cosmic* view of Christ. Rather than pondering only the Jesus of history, a man from Nazareth who lived and died in the first-century, Paul invites us to step back and see the bigger picture, to understand who Jesus Christ really is. Before he took on human flesh and became man, he was already at work in the world. In fact, he was the unseen force holding all Creation together. However, his work was not finished once all things came into being, for the redemption of the human race had not yet been accomplished. Human beings needed more than a world in which to live our finite, mortal lives. We needed a *Savior* who could reveal our Creator to us in human form, *reconcile* us to that Creator, and bring us into eternal communion with him. It seems that there was only one way to fulfill that noble mission. The Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity had to unite humanity to his divinity and then offer *himself* as a living sacrifice, acceptable to the Father, so that human nature and divine nature could be inextricably and eternally linked. This is what Paul means when he declares that the Father, “delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the Kingdom of his beloved Son.” We were already God’s children, even while we remained limited by our merely human existence. But then, Jesus *remade* us into something new. He delivered us from a kingdom of darkness and death, and made us heirs to *God’s Kingdom* of light and eternal life. As Paul says, “Let us give thanks to the Father, who has made [us] fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light.”

So, we know what *Christ* has done for us by his sacrifice on the cross. We know what *the Father* has done for us by sending Christ into the world for our salvation. Now, what are we supposed to do as faithful subjects of Christ the King?

For starters, we should always remember that, like David, Jesus is a *shepherd* as well as a commander. He doesn’t just give us orders and demand that we follow out of fear or blind obedience. Rather, he *calls* to us as a shepherd calls his sheep, and we follow the gentle sound of his voice because we trust in his care for us. We know that he will always lead us to good pastures, in this life and the next. Second, we should do our part to *build his Kingdom* here on earth, even as we look forward to the fullness of the Kingdom in heaven. He has given us an eternal inheritance, but he also invites us to serve him *here* and *now*.