

Homily for Sunday, November 22, 2009 (Solemnity of Christ the King)

Daniel 7:13-14; Psalm 93:1, 1-2, 5; Revelation 1:5-8; John 18:33b-37

St. Philomena Parish, Detroit

With the rapid advances in technology these days, it's not too hard to say or do something that tells me that "the train has left the station" and has left me standing on the platform! A couple of years ago I was driving in a van with some young people and heard a song on the radio that I really liked. I remarked, "I just love that record!" One of them asked, "What's a record?" I once asked one of our twenty-something friars what time it was. Instead of looking at his watch he checked his cell phone. I then realized that he didn't even own a watch!

In a similar vein, I suspect that if I asked a younger brother or sister today about Christ the King, he or she might respond, "A king? Didn't we, like, have a revolution and get rid of our king here for over 200 years ago?" Kings are an anomaly these days. In the few nations like Great Britain that still have royalty, the kings, queens, princes and princesses are usually treated as ceremonial figures, fodder for the tabloids, or historical relics. That's why people may find it hard to relate to today's solemnity of Christ the King or take it seriously.

Today's Scripture readings and feast, however, challenge us to take it *very* seriously. For at its core is something that is not only relevant but even critical to our lives: *our relationship with Jesus Christ*. To speak of Christ as King in 2009 is not a matter of titles or customs but of love, devotion, obedience and mission.

Throughout their history, the people of Israel had a rather ambivalent relationship with their kings. From the time God first encountered their ancestor Abraham, God was to be their King. Thus God through Moses gave them the Law. God was also their protector, their defender in battle. As we read in Deuteronomy 30:1-10, God assured them that if they were faithful to him and his commandments, he would be loyal to them and grant them prosperity and peace on their own land. It was a system of mutual loyalty and obligations.

But once Israel settled in the Promised Land and started to interact with the nations around them, they became unsettled and dissatisfied with their relationship with this God they could not see. They wanted a king whom they could see and touch, one that would make them like the other nations.

Though he felt rejected, God granted their wish, but not before warning them of the problems they would have with their kings (1 Samuel 8). The first one chosen for them was Saul: tall, good looking, a gifted speaker, and a brave warrior (See 1 Samuel 9 and 10). But he had his problems, too: he was moody, impulsive, insecure, and prone to fits of rage.

Saul embodied a range of goodness and sinfulness that would mark the kings of Israel and Judah for the rest of their history. Some, like David and Solomon,

were quite good. Others, like Manasseh, were nothing less than a scandal. Some led Israel closer to God, but many others led them astray and into idolatry, social injustice, and ill-conceived alliances with other nations.

Eventually those kings led them into 70 years of exile in Babylon. For the next six centuries up to the time of Christ the only kings that the people of Israel would know were those of the great empires (the Babylonians, Medes, Persians, Greeks and Romans) that ruled over them, often oppressively.

Throughout this time God's people never completely lost the hope that one day Israel would again have its own king—one who would rule over them in justice, prosperity and peace. That hope was still very much alive at the time of Jesus, so it's no surprise that some of the people believed that he might be the *messiah* or "anointed one" (anointing was a special sign of God's commissioning).

It was likewise no surprise that those who wanted Jesus dead would cynically exploit that hope—and the Romans' paranoia and fear of it being realized. In such an environment, "the king of the Jews" would be viewed by the Romans as nothing less than a threat to national security!

Against that background, then, is set the dramatic interrogation of Jesus by Pontius Pilate in today's gospel reading. Pilate wanted to know the details about Jesus' kingdom and his kingship; but as we heard, he and Jesus were speaking two different languages:

- Pilate assumed that they were speaking of an earthly and material kingdom; but Jesus spoke about a heavenly and spiritual kingdom that would be manifest to the world.
- Pilate's security was rooted in vast armies of soldiers on foot, horses and chariots and armed with swords, spears, and other weapons; but Jesus' army featured only his disciples armed with the weapons of faith, hope and love, among other spiritual gifts.
- Pilate was concerned about a king who would rule over others; but Jesus proclaimed and showed the world a different model of leadership, one that focused on service and power *with and for* others.
- Jesus preached a revolution; but it was one of mind, heart, and will.

The Romans had a direct and final way of dealing with those suspected of fomenting revolution: crucifixion, a humiliating form of public execution. It was on that cross, under a sign that read "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews," that he gave his life for us. He was a king whom they could kill but never defeat.

Roughly eighty generations have passed since that time, yet the questions that challenged the early church are the same for us today: *Will we let Christ be our King? Are we willing to live in his kingdom and let his kingdom live in us?* As we end this church year and prepare for Advent, may we be able to answer all of those questions with a "Yes!" that resounds in all that we say and do. +