

Solemnity of Christ the King

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 23:1-2, 2-3, 5-6
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming!
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 25:31-46

Today the Church celebrates the Solemnity of Jesus Christ or Christ the King—King of the Universe is actually the official title for this solemnity. It's commonly called the feast of Christ the King. It's the last Sunday of Ordinary Time. And so for today, the Church gives us a reading from the letter of St. Paul for the second reading, as usual, which is focused on once again the eschaton—the end of the world, the final coming of Christ in glory—which is how the liturgical year works.

It's very interesting. When you come to Advent, you begin with the end, in a sense. The readings of Advent start with the prophecies of the coming, the first Advent of Jesus, but also point to the second Advent of Christ at the end of time. And then as the liturgical year moves through the life of Jesus—passion, death, and resurrection, His public ministry—then it comes back around at the end to the end of time and to the *parousia* of Christ.

So it's fitting, then, that the Church would give us one of St. Paul's most famous descriptions of the *parousia* of Jesus for the feast of Christ the King. And so let's look at that. It's in 1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28. We'll read through that, and then we'll just try to unpack the implications of this solemnity. Paul says:

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be

made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

And then it skips here down to verse 28:

When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be...

The RSV here reads:

...everything to every one.¹

That is a very bad translation. The literal in Greek is that “God may be all in all.” So I’m adapting that there, just because when you say “God may be everything to every one,” in our contemporary context, it sounds like...for people who love puppies, God will be a puppy. Or people who love chocolate chip cookies, God will be a cookie. That’s not what Paul is saying. I don’t know why I chose those examples, but there you go. People do like puppies and cookies.

But that is not what Paul means. He’s talking about God being all in all. It’s the universal reign of God over all creation and the suffusion, in a sense, of all creation with the power and the life-giving Spirit of God. We’ll talk about what that means in just a second; I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s back up and just walk through what Paul’s getting at in these verses and then why the Church gives us this particular reading for the feast of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe.

Okay, so a couple things. First, the imagery of first fruits. Here Paul is taking a standard agricultural image, both from the Old Testament but also from just Jewish

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

experience in the first century AD, and using it as an analogy or a metaphor for the final judgment...for the end of time.

So the first fruits was basically the fruit part of the harvest—whether a harvest of grain, like of wheat, barley, in the spring...or the harvest of grapes or fruits in the fall harvest. In the book of Exodus 23:19, God commands His people to offer Him the first fruits of the harvest. So for example, in the spring when the first sheaves of grain would begin to sprout, they would actually cut down one of those sheaves. And they would bring that sheaf—before they would grind it down and make wheat out of it and eat it themselves—they would bring an offering of the first fruits, which are often the best, and they would give it to God as a sacrifice in the temple. The sheaf offering is sometimes called the feast of first fruits, so the offering of the sheaf.

And that act of giving God the first fruits of your harvest was basically the agricultural equivalent of a tithe. So many people are familiar with tithing. Even if Catholics don't do it, they've heard about their Protestant friends doing it, because it's very popular in Protestant churches to teach the practice of tithing. And that goes back to ancient Israel in which God would require people to give ten percent of their income or revenue or their harvest to Him. It was a way of taking the first ten percent and giving it to God, which is both a kind of sacrifice. It's a kind of act of thanksgiving. It's a recognition that everything we have comes from God. But it's also an act of faith.

It'd be one thing if you gave God the last fruits, after you made sure your family got fed and you got fed and you paid all the bills. And then once all that's done, then you give God the last fruits. When you give Him the first fruits, you're taking the risk that there might not be other fruits, and giving Him that cut off of the top as a sacrificial offering in faith.

So Paul takes that analogy of the first fruits of the harvest and he says that's what the resurrection is. When Jesus is raised on Easter Sunday, He's the first sheaf of grain that was cut down and now being offered up to God. So His death is like it's being cut and then the resurrection—well, the cross is His offering, sacrificial offering to the Father—but then literally He goes up into the Father's realm, just

like the smoke of the sacrifice goes up into sky, goes up into Heaven. So the Paschal Mystery is itself a kind of image or should I say, the fruit fruits is an image of the Paschal Mystery...of Christ's passion, death, resurrection, and ascension.

What Paul is saying then, is that Christ is the first fruits of a harvest that will be fully harvested at the resurrection of the dead on the last day. So He's the first offering, and then *we* are the rest of the harvest. So it's a very powerful image, very cosmic, agricultural image for the resurrection of Jesus. And I think it's important for us to think about it this way, because at least in my experience of teaching, a lot of modern day Christians think of the resurrection primarily (if not exclusively) as a vindication of Jesus' divinity or a vindication of His Messianic identity. So people said He wasn't the Messiah, but the resurrection proves that He was.

And that's of course true. That's a dimension of the resurrection, but it's not the fullness of the mystery, because for Paul, the resurrection is much more than a vindication of who Jesus was. It's also—sorry for the big word, but it's an ante-donation of what is to come. It's a down payment, in advance, of what God has in store for the rest of humanity who are in Christ. So what happens to Jesus in the middle of time in the resurrection will happen to all those who are in Christ at the end of time in the resurrection of the dead on the last day, on the day of judgment.

So the harvest is a perfect image for that, for a first century Jew who is familiar with the stages of harvesting the wheat and offering the first fruits to God and then gathering in the rest. Which, by the way, they would also...after that first grain offering which took place the day after Passover on the day of the sheaf offering, Pentecost (which is fifty days later) was another harvest festival where they would bring in the rest of the sheaves and make another offering to God. So there's a kind of parallel between the offering of Jesus during Passover of Himself and then Pentecost, fifty days later, in a sense represents the gathering of the nations, the gathering of the Church being offered to God.

So it's beautiful and powerful, and I think very helpful way for modern Christians to think about eschatology, because we're so disconnected from the rhythms—at least, especially you're in the west, if you live in an industrialized city or society. It's very easy to get disconnected from the rhythms of planting and harvest and the

seasons of the year. But Paul uses those seasons that people are familiar with to explain the mystery of Christ's resurrection and the resurrection of the dead on the last day. That's the first point.

Second point is Paul's use of the imagery of Adam and Christ. Notice he says:

For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. (1 Corinthians 15:21)

Well, the two men that he's referring to there are the first man, Adam, in Genesis 1-3, and then the last man, Christ, the new Adam. So this is a really fascinating verse, because Paul, throughout his letters, over and over again, he always speaks about being *in Christo*, in Christ. That's one of Paul's distinctive theological formulas. He sees the Church as the Body of Christ, the mystical Body of Christ. That's a uniquely Pauline imagery, and Paul's favorite way of expressing that mystery of what the Church is is to talk about being in Christ.

Some theologians have even called the doctrine of participation in Christ the center of Pauline theology. It's the center of his thought—this notion that once you have faith and are baptized, you're in Christ. You're in this new sphere of reality that means belonging to His mystical Body.

Well, what Paul is doing here is he's adding another dimension to that, because there's the mystical Body of Christ—those who belong corporately to His Body—and apparently there's also in a sense the mystical body of Adam, those who are in Adam who belong to that corporate humanity of Adam. And the difference between those two spheres of reality is that in Adam all die. That's what Adam brings his body—death through sin. And in Christ, all are made alive. That's what Christ brings His Body—life.

So if you look, as I've mentioned before in our study of Paul, you can think about this in terms of the two circles, these two overlapping spheres of reality—the old creation and the new creation. And if you look at the circles there, this reflects that Jewish expectation (or Jewish idea) of this world and the world to come. Well, this world, the old creation, is the sphere of those who are in Adam. And then the new

world, the new creation, is the sphere of those who are in Christ. So Paul here is setting up a distinction between these two spheres of reality because he's trying to help people understand what the resurrection is all about. So he goes on to say:

But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:23)

So again, the Christian in the present moment now lives in between those two spheres of reality. They're overlapping spheres. So those who are baptized, in a sense, we have one foot in both worlds. We're both living in the world of Adam (of suffering, sin, and death); that's the visible reality. The invisible reality is that we are actually in Christ, and we're going to be made alive in Christ in the resurrection...but, everything in its own order. That happens to Christ in the middle of time, but it won't happen to humanity until the end of time. So Christ is the first fruits of those who, at His coming, will then be raised with Him.

And I think this is important, too, to emphasize, because again, in my experience teaching over the years, many Christians have a pretty clear idea of what the Scriptures say happened to Jesus in His bodily resurrection on Easter Sunday. But they often don't translate it to the eschaton and really ponder the implications of what everything that happens to Jesus in the Paschal Mystery happens to the rest of humanity who are in Christ at the end of time. So if you're wondering how real will the resurrection of the body be at the end of time according to Scripture, well, it'll be as real as Jesus' is on Easter Sunday. So there's an analogy there, a similarity between the two realities that Paul is drawing on here.

Now you might think, "What does any of this have to do with Christ the King?" Well, we have to get to the third point here, which is the imagery of the kingdom. So Paul says that on that day, on the day of the *parousia*, that:

Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. (1 Corinthians 15:24-25)

Alright, this is important. When Paul uses the imagery of the kingdom here, he's using the Greek word *basileia*, which is the same word Jesus uses over and over again in the Gospels when He talks about the kingdom of the God, the kingdom of God, the kingdom of God. Now many Christians nowadays when they hear the kingdom of God or the kingdom of Heaven, they tend to gloss it or translate it simply as Heaven. "So the kingdom of Heaven is the place where my soul goes after I die—that's what the kingdom of Heaven is." And that's not incorrect, but that's not the full truth about the kingdom, because the kingdom has a number of dimensions, and in some cases it can actually refer to the body of the people who are under the reign of Christ.

So you can talk about the United States of America, the nation of the United States, as the place, the territory, where the United States governs. But you can also talk about the nation as the people who belong to that nation. When Christ is talking about handing the kingdom over to God the Father, He's not talking about handing Heaven to God the Father. He's talking about giving the corporate body of the kingdom, all those who are under Him, His reign, offering them to the Father just like the harvest would be offered to God on Pentecost. All of the grain would be offered—not all of it, but a symbolic representation of the grain would be offered to God as a sacrifice. So it's both a kind of eschatological and a temple image that Paul is fusing into one. He loves to mix his metaphors. It's one reason I like him, because I do that all of the time too.

So He's handing the kingdom over to God the Father, but He's only doing it after destroying every enemy and power. So who are these rules, authorities, powers, and enemies that Christ is destroying? Well, if you read Paul carefully, the language of "ruler, authority, power" can apply to earthly rulers and authorities and powers. But for Paul, he likes actually to particularly use those terms to refer to angelic powers—evil angels, Satan, and the fallen angels who lead the world and lead the rulers of this world astray, especially in the form of pagan empires that persecuted the people of God.

So when Paul says that Christ...

...must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.

He's speaking here about Jesus conquering all of the evil forces in the world, both visible and invisible, and putting them all under His feet—in other words, reigning supreme over them all. And the imagery there of putting them under His feet—that's actually an allusion to Psalm 110. Paul is again speaking as a Jew here. He's using Scriptural image from Judaism when he says, Psalm 110, famous line quoted by Jesus:

The Lord says to my lord:
“Sit at my right hand,
till I make your enemies your footstool.”

So that Psalm, which Jesus Himself applies to the Ascension of the Son of man into Heaven, to be seated at the right hand of the Father, is the kind of paradigmatic biblical description of Jesus' sovereign reign, not just over the Earth, but over Heaven and Earth—over all the invisible powers, over the angelic powers, over all creatures. He will reign as king, and all of His enemies, He will rest His feet on them as a conqueror.

Now...press in a little bit here. This is really important. When Jesus talks about handing the kingdom over to the Father, the obvious implication is that Christ is what? He is the king. So the word that He's using here—when you use the word kingdom in a first century Jewish context—is the same word that's used to refer to the Roman empire.

Let me give you an example of this. If you look at 1 Peter 2:17...very famous line from the first letter of Peter, where he's writing to Christians who are under Roman occupation, but also there's apparently—there's debate about this, exactly how extensive it is, but—Roman persecution as well. In any case, there's unrest, and so in 1 Peter 2:17, it says:

Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

Now anyone who reads that knows that the emperor refers to Caesar, but if you look at the Greek, it's very interesting. Because when it says, “Honor the emperor,”

literally in Greek it says, “Honor the *basilea*”...which is the term (same word) as king. You can actually translate this: “Honor the king.” And some translations do, like the New American Bible, for example. But the reason people translate it as “Honor the emperor,” is because *basilea*—or *basileus*, you’ll sometimes see it in different forms—is a Greek term that refers to not just any king, but the king of kings who is the emperor.

So what does that mean? What is an emperor? An emperor is a king who rules over other kings. It’s real simple. Just like a nation might have a king, but a kingdom or an empire is a kingdom that rules over other nations, and an emperor is a king who rules over other kings. And so when Paul describes Jesus as a king who has a kingdom that’s going to be over every other ruler and power, effectively, what Paul is describing Jesus as—and what the New Testament is describing Jesus as—is not just the king of the kingdom of God, but the emperor of the universe.

Now, for someone growing up in the 80s as I did, if I say the words “the emperor”—I have to do this—I think of the emperor of Star Wars, from George Lucas’ famous trilogy. And the emperor in that trilogy, in that series of movies, is a figure of pure evil. The emperor is an evil figure, precisely because he wants to dominate not just the planet, not just the galaxy, but the whole universe. And Lucas there is actually tapping into a very deep biblical motif, which is that God, as well as the Messiah in the letters of Paul, is not just king of the Earth but the king of all creation, the king of the entire universe.

And so Christ in the New Testament—we do not think of Him this way, but this is the fact—is being described by Paul and by other apostolic writings as the emperor of the universe, because he rules over all creation. And every other authority is under him.

So there’s a real sense in which the kingdom of God, the Greek expression, can rightly be translated “the empire of God,” because God sends...the mission of Jesus, the mission of Christ isn’t just to save people from sins. It’s to conquer the entire universe for God the Father and to put it in subjection to Him, because that’s what empires do. They’re not content to simply rule over their own land. Think of the British empire. They occupied territories throughout the known world on

continents spread far and wide. They spread their influence, because that's what kingdoms do—that's what empires do.

And that's the same thing that's true of the Church. The Church is the empire of God active on Earth, and its mission is to go out and conquer the entire world—to put the entire world in subjection to the true emperor of the universe, who is Jesus Christ, the king of the world, the king of the universe.

And so the feast of Christ the King at the end of the liturgical year is basically the Church reminding us of the ultimate end of Her own mission, which is to bring all things in subjection to Christ—every political power, every authority, every ruler, every individual, every place, not just on this Earth but in the Heavens, every invisible and visible power is all going to be subjected to Christ. And then when that happens—on the last day as Paul describes here—Christ Himself, the Son, takes it and He hands it over as an offering to the Father. The offering that Jesus gives to the Father is the offering of the entire cosmos subject to Him as its reign and its ruler. So He is the king of creation...which now you understand—go back to 1 Corinthians when it says that God may be all in all. It's the universal reign of God over the entire creation.

Now you might think, “Whoa, hold on, Dr. Pitre. What about that verse:

When all things are subjected to him [Christ], then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be [all in all].

Some people have taken this verse in what is known as a subordinationist direction to argue that somehow the Son is inferior to the Father. And so when you read that kind of verse and it looks like there's a theological error, some kind of christological problem, it's always a good idea to go look at St. Thomas. How does St. Thomas read this passage? One of the great theologians in the history of the Church, arguably—well, there's debate about who is the greatest. Augustinians won't like it if I say Thomas is the greatest. But he's the greatest. Anyways...I showed my hand there.

Okay, Thomas in the *Summa*—I’m sorry, not in the *Summa* but in his *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*. This is how he describes it. So let’s think about this carefully, so I want to make sure we understand Paul’s words correctly. He writes in his commentary from the 13th century:

[W]hen all things shall have been subjected to him, namely, to Christ, then the subject himself *according to his humanity* will be subjected to him, namely, to *the Father*: “The Father is greater than I” (John 14:28)...

Okay, so pause there. Sometimes people will wonder about that verse in John 14. How can Jesus say “the Father is greater than I,” and then in the same Gospel in John chapter 10—actually before—say “I and the Father are one” or “before Abraham was, I am”...and then be attacked for claiming equality with God. So is He equal to God or is the Father greater than Him? And both are true but with distinct references to His human nature, which is limited and finite, and to His divine nature, which is unlimited and eternal.

Now these two natures are perfectly united in the one person of the divine Son—that’s what the incarnation, that whole mystery is about. But sometimes Christ will speak in the Gospel (especially the Gospel of John) with reference to His humanity and other times with reference to His divinity as both of those mysteries are being in a sense unfolded. And so what Thomas is saying here is...when Paul says “Christ will be subjected to the Father,” he’s speaking about His humanity, in the same way as when Jesus Himself says “the Father is greater than I.” Now let’s keep going; I kind of cut off the middle of the quote. Thomas continues:

...and even now Christ as man is subjected to the Father, but this will be more manifest then. The reason for this subjection is “that God may be all in all,” i.e., that the soul of men rest entirely in God, and God alone be beatitude. For now there is life and virtue in one glory and in another; but then God will be the life and salvation and virtue and glory and all things.²

² Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* no. 950; trans. F. R. Larcher, O.P.

Fantastic. So always go to the saints. If you want to understand the Scriptures, first place to start is ask, “What does the tradition say?” So clear and so helpful unpacking that mystery of the incarnation and what will happen at the end of time—what Paul means when he says, “Christ will be manifest. He will reign over all things, and God will be all in all.” And that’s what we’re celebrating on the feast of—or the solemnity—of our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe.