

The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Daniel 7:13-14
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is king; he is robed in majesty.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 93:1, 1-2, 5
<i>Second Reading</i>	Revelation 1:5-8
<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 to come!
<i>Gospel</i>	John 18:33-37

The final Sunday of the liturgical year every year ends with the Solemnity of Jesus Christ, the King of the Universe, often called the Feast of Christ the King. Now throughout Year B we've been journeying through the Gospel of Mark, looking at the life of Jesus as it's told in the Gospel of Mark. And it's kind of funny, it's a little ironic, that the church brings the year dedicated to the Gospel of Mark to its end by quoting from the Gospel of John. So our final Gospel reading for Year B is not actually from Mark, it's actually from the Gospel of John 18, the famous exchange between Jesus and Pilate regarding his kingdom and his kingship. So let's look at this final reading for this Solemnity of Christ the King and see what it reveals to us. John 18:33-37 says this:

Pilate entered the praetorium again and called Jesus, and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me; what have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world." Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have

come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice."¹

There are several things taking place here. First of all, this is happening in the praetorium in a kind of trial or hearing before Pilate. So just as Jesus was brought before the Jewish authorities in the gathering of the Sanhedrin, so now he's being brought before Pontius Pilate, who is the Roman procurator, or you could translate it as a governor as well, over Judea during the time of Christ's execution. So he has been brought to Pilate on not a religious charge but what we might call a political charge, right. So, I mean, it has religious connotations, the claim that he is the Messiah is a claim to kingship, and although as we see in the synoptic Gospels the principal issue that the Sanhedrin has with Jesus is the charge of blasphemy, they're not going to be able to get him executed by the Romans on the charge of blasphemy, because the Romans don't care whether some individual Jew violates the Torah of Moses. It's the political dimensions, and the potentially treasonous dimensions, of claiming to be a king when Caesar alone is to be considered king that actually makes Jesus' messianic identity a dangerous or politically volatile reality. So on the pretense of a political charge Jesus is brought before Pilate and so Pilate questions him on that political charge: "Are you the King of the Jews?" Notice here he doesn't use the Old Testament title of Messiah, *mashiach* or anointed one, because he's not focusing on the anointed character of Jesus, he's focusing on his royal identity, are you the King of the Jews. So Jesus answered him, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others tell you about me?"

So here we notice something interesting about Jesus whenever he's responding to people's statements in the midst of his trial. Even in these contexts he frequently will throw back a person's words to them and get them to either ask the question or answer it for themselves. We've seen him do this throughout the Gospels: what do you think, what do you say, who do you say that I am? And he's doing it here with Pilate as well: are you saying this of your own accord or are others saying it to you about me? He's almost kind of, in a sense it sounds like, he's trying to elicit a confession of faith, so to speak, by Pilate in his messiahship. Pilate, you can tell, is a little insulted by that, so as a good Roman he says, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have

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.

handed you over; what have you done?" So he's trying to get at the question of the charges being made against Jesus. And in response to that Jesus gives a statement here, which unfortunately I think the Revised Standard Version mistranslates so I want to make sure we clarify this. The RSV here says, "my kingship is not of this world," which puts the focus on Jesus' kingly identity, right, my kingship. There's a sense in which that's true. Pilate is talking to him about his identity as king but that's not actually what the Greek word says. The Greek, original Greek, Jesus says my *basileia* is not of this world and *basileia* is just a word for kingdom, right. Over and over again in the Gospels Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, it's the *Basileia tou Theou*. Same word, same form, kingdom of God. So you see an attempt here on the RSV translators to avoid the idea that the kingdom itself is not from the world that it's heavenly, alright. But that's precisely Jesus' point is that he does have a kingdom but that it's not of this world. He goes on to illustrate the otherworldly nature of his kingdom by pointing out that if his kingdom were of the world his disciples, his servants, would fight, because that's how kingdoms in the world defend themselves, they go into battle against one another. But his servants are not going to fight, instead they don't fight, therefore his kingdom is not from the world, it's not a worldly kingdom, it's not a this world kingdom.

Which as you're listening to those statements, it should make you think back to the Garden of Gethsemane where Peter takes out his sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant. What does that reveal to you about Peter? That in some sense he still, at the Garden of Gethsemane, did not understand that the kingdom was not of this world, right, but that it was heavenly, because he tries to fight using the sword as if he's fighting for Jesus as an earthly king. That's precisely what Jesus is not claiming to be and that's precisely the wrong view of the kingdom that Jesus is communicating to Pilate here, that Pilate doesn't understand the nature of his kingdom. But what Pilate is interested in here is not so much the nature of Jesus' kingdom as Jesus' kingly identity. So implicit in Jesus' words about having a kingdom is of course the fact that he is a king and so Pilate says to him, "So you are a king?" And Jesus says what he says at his other trials, "You say that I am a king;" the whole reason you're bringing me here before you is the pretense that I am a king.

So we'll see Jesus do this also in his trials. Someone will make an affirmation and he'll say you have said so, you have said so, you say I am a king. It's very similar to the English expression you said it. You said it is an affirmation but it's an affirmation that

throws the responsibility back on the person making the claim. So here Jesus is kind of both affirming that he is a king but he's also pressing the point that Pilate is the one making the assertion. And then he adds to that this word, "For this I was born, and this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice."

Alright, so we've got a final element here. In the Gospel of John, one of the key terms that John uses over and over is the Greek word *martyreō*, it means to bear witness. You can hear the English word martyr comes from that word, *martyreō*, and a martyr is somebody who bears witness to the truth. A martyr is somebody who gives public testimony to their faith in Christ. So what Jesus is saying here is that his role as a king is to bear witness to the truth so that everyone who is of the truth, who belongs to the truth, hears his voice. Now the obvious implication here is that Pilate is not of the truth, that he doesn't belong to the truth, because he's ultimately going to reject Jesus' claim and he's not going to hear the truth in the words that Jesus is saying to him; that he is a king but that his kingdom is not of this world.

It's unfortunate, well I'm not in charge I'm just in sales, I'm not management, but it is unfortunate I think that the lectionary left out the very next line in which Pilate says his famous words, "What is truth?" Because I think in our day and time the kingship of Christ is directly related to, and in many ways directly challenged by, a kind of relativism that would even deny that there even is any such thing as truth. That appears to be the kind of implication of Pilate's words. Actually I like to say to my students that Pilate is the patron saint of relativism, because in this statement what is truth he's implying that there isn't any such thing as truth. The irony is he's actually standing in the presence of truth incarnate and saying what is truth. I mean a more blind statement you could not imagine then to say what is truth in the presence of Jesus Christ standing there before you; the word made flesh, the way, the truth and the life. It's also interesting too because this passage is preserved on the oldest fragment of the copy of the Gospel of John that we possess, an ancient papyrus fragment that most scholars date to around the Second Century A.D. It has those words of Pilate in John 18, what is truth. Kind of an interesting coincidence of history that the oldest copy of a fragment from John's gospel that we have is asking the question that all Christians, in fact all people, need to answer in the presence of Jesus: what is the truth. What is the truth about the world and what is the truth about Jesus of Nazareth and who he claimed to be.

Okay, so that's the gospel reading for today. I think it's a really important gospel just because it raises a question for us of the identity of Jesus in maybe a way that we don't think about it as often as we should. I think many contemporary Christians are pretty comfortable saying Jesus Christ is the Savior, saves me from my sin, or Jesus Christ is the Messiah, he's the long-awaited king of Israel, or Jesus Christ is the Lord, right. He's God made man, he's the divine son of God. But, I don't know that we always think as clearly about what it means to claim that he is also the king, right.

If you're like me, you grew up in the United States, you grew up in a republic or a democracy, there's some debates about exactly how to parse that out, a democratic republic, representative republic, whatever it is. However, you understand our form of government and the form of many nations in the modern world, we are post-monarchical. We don't have a king, we don't have heirs to the throne, it's not a royal bloodline or those kind of things. It's not a nation being governed by one person who has sovereign power, right. We don't live in a monarchical society. If you look at kingdoms after the French Revolution we tend to depict them as something bad, right.

So the idea here that the shape of Jesus' followers, the shape of those over whom he is the teacher and master is monarchical, is kingdom shaped, can be a little difficult for us to get our brains around, right, but that's who he's claiming to be. He's claiming to be the king, not just of Judea or Galilee or Samaria, he's the king of the universe, which means he is the person to whom we owe our ultimate allegiance. That's really what we're celebrating on this Feast of Christ the King. We are reminding ourselves that above every ruler of every nation and every kingdom on earth stands the supreme King of Kings, as he's called in the Book of Revelation, the Lord of Lords, Jesus Christ, the King of the Universe, right. So Pilate, who is a Roman governor, he's not even a king himself, is ironically standing before Jesus as if Pilate is the one who has authority over him, when in fact it's the other way around. Jesus isn't just the king of the Jews, he's the king of the universe. He's the king of the entire world, he's the king of the cosmos. He is the one who will ultimately judge Pilate who in space and time acted as his judge before his crucifixion. So it's just a lot of rich things to meditate and ponder in this passage in John 18.

Let's go back to the Old Testament reading for today because it points out this mysterious heavenly nature of Jesus' kingdom in a very powerful way. So on the Solemnity of Christ the King of the Universe the church gives us a passage from the Book of

Daniel which may be one of most important passages in the Old Testament. It's Daniel's prophecy of the coming of the Son of Man. Now we talked about this before in other contexts because Jesus refers to himself as Son of Man over and over and over again in the Gospel of Mark. It's his favorite title for referring to himself in terms of his messianic identity, but also in terms of his divine identity and his divine authority and divine power. So if we go back to Daniel 7:13-14 we read the passage for today, we'll see that royal themes are front and center. As we read it we want to ask ourselves, what kind of kingdom is Daniel foreseeing? What kind of kingdom will the Messiah rule over? Daniel says this:

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Okay, so a couple of figures in this vision need to be detailed. Number one, you've got the Son of Man. Well who is this Son of Man? Well it's interesting, the expression Son of Man means a human being in the Old Testament. It's frequently used to describe a human being. And yet in this case Daniel sees a heavenly figure who appears as a Son of Man. Notices he says I saw one like a Son of Man. So what's the implication? He looks human but he is also a divine figure, he is a heavenly being. You can see that by the fact that he's coming on the clouds of heaven. Every other time in the Old Testament someone is described as coming on the clouds it's always God who comes on the clouds. And yet Daniel's puzzled because he sees this apparently human figure coming on the clouds of heaven. It's the heavenly Son of Man, which the earliest Jewish interpreters would have all identified as the Messiah, the long-awaited king of Israel. The second figure in the vision is the Ancient of Days, who Daniel describes earlier in chapter 7, and this is an image for God, right, seated upon his heavenly throne. So what's really significant about this whole vision is that it's taking place not on earth but in heaven. He doesn't say I saw the Messiah ascending the steps of the Temple and entering to sit upon the throne of Solomon. No, that's not what he says. He says I saw the Son of Man riding on the clouds to ascend to the throne of the Ancient of Days. So this is not an earthly kingdom like that of David's, it's a heavenly kingdom.

If you have any doubts about that, notice what happens. To the Son of Man is given dominion, glory, power, that peoples, nations, languages and kingdoms would serve him. So what kind of kingdom is this? Three characteristics. Number one, it's heavenly, it's depicted as being given to him not on earth but in heaven. Number two, it's an everlasting kingdom. Unlike David's kingdom, this kingdom doesn't pass away. David's kingdom, God had promised him, would last forever, but it only lasted for a few hundred years before it all fell apart. And then third, and this is really important, it's a universal kingdom, because it includes not just the Israelites, not just the Judeans, not just the 12 tribes, but all peoples, nations, languages, and tongues. They're all going to serve the Son of Man. So it's a heavenly, universal, everlasting kingdom. That's the kind of kingdom that the Son of Man is going to rule over and that's the kingdom that Jesus is speaking about when he says to Pilate my kingdom is not of this world.

So on the one hand, Pilate and the Sanhedrin are mistaken to charge Jesus with making the claim to be an earthly king, right. He's not an ordinary king, he's not claiming to be the true ruler of Judah in the way that Caesar is laying claim to these earthly territories, right. So in that sense he's not a political threat. He's not going to raise up an army of fishermen to try to rebel against the Romans who are occupying Jerusalem, occupying Judea. That's not the kind of kingdom he's talking about. On the other hand, the kingdom he's describing is politically charged in the sense that he's claiming it is above all the kingdoms of the world. He's claiming he has more authority than Caesar. To claim the allegiance of the peoples to a king who is above Caesar is still politically dangerous. It is still a politically charged threat because it means that your supreme allegiance, your ultimate allegiance, isn't to the earthly ruler of the nation or the state or the kingdom in which you belong, but your supreme allegiance is to God and to Jesus Christ who is seated on a heavenly throne.

Just as a side note, it's no coincidence that the Feast of Christ the King, the Solemnity of Christ the King, was instituted by Pope Pius XI in the year 1925 in the wake of the first world war, and of course as the storms were beginning to gather for the conflicts that would ultimately lead to the second world war. So it's in that context, with the rise of nationalism in Europe and all the unbelievable bloodshed and warfare that took place as a result of making the nation-state the highest moral authority, the highest power, that the Pope wanted to remind the people of Europe, and of the world, that at

the end of the day Christ alone is the supreme king of the universe and that he is above every earthly authority, every earthly nation, and every earthly ruler.

So in response to that, Psalm 93, the Responsorial Psalm for the day, we remember, we proclaim, that the Lord is the king, right, so we proclaim his royal identity. But we also point out that his throne is from of old, it is from everlasting days, so it's from eternity, right. So unlike the kings of this world, unlike every king of this world whose throne began at a certain point and which will probably end at a certain point, they're all temporary. The kingdom of God is eternal, it has no beginning and it has no end, it is everlasting.

So in closing then I just would like to end with a reflection from St. Augustine in his *Tractates on the Gospel of John*. He has a number of tractates on John where he comments on this and he makes a point about the nature of Christ's kingdom. This is what he says:

Indeed, his kingdom is here until the end of time, and until the harvest comes will contain weeds... And this could not happen if the kingdom were not here. But even so, it is not *from here*, for it is in exile in the world. Christ says to his kingdom, "You are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world" (John 15:19)... [E]veryone who is reborn in Christ becomes the kingdom that is no longer of the world. For God has snatched us from the powers of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of his beloved Son.²

So notice what Augustine does, he draws out one more implication of Jesus' words here, namely this, the relationship between the kingdom and the church. I'll never forget years ago I had a disagreement with a Protestant friend of mine about the kingdom, and it became quickly apparent that we saw it at completely different terms. For him the kingdom was something that would only come at the end of time; only at the final judgment would the kingdom come. For me, as a Catholic, the kingdom was already present in the church. When I tried to identify the kingdom in the church, he said no, no, no, the kingdom doesn't have anything to do with the church, the kingdom comes at the end of time; the church is now, the kingdom is in the future.

² Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 115.2; trans. in J. C. Elowsky, p.290

And it's interesting's because there is some truth to that. The kingdom will come in its fullness at the end of time, but the church is very clear here that the church on earth is the kingdom of God but present in mystery, right. It doesn't look quite like the kingdom but it is the kingdom, there's still weeds and wheat in the field, so to speak. And you know this is the case because Jesus gives Peter the keys of the kingdom and makes him the foundation stone of his church, right. So in that statement to Peter in Matthew 16, kingdom and church are two ways of talking about the same reality. So I just think it's important to remember that. That although the church is essentially heavenly in her nature and she will only be fulfilled at the end of time, the church is the kingdom present in mystery, as Vatican II taught. So what Augustine is saying to us here is that insofar as we belong to the church, we live in this world, but we're not of the world, because we belong to a kingdom that is essentially heavenly in character.