

Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

(Solemnity, Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	2 Samuel 5:1-3
<i>Response</i>	Let us go to the house of the Lord!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 122:1-2, 3-4, 4-5
<i>Second Reading</i>	Colossians 1:12-20
<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! Hosanna in the highest!
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 23:35-43

The Solemnity of the Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, commonly referred to as the Feast of Christ the King, for Year C, brings us to a beautiful famous passage from the letters of Paul in the letter to the Colossians, from a section known as the Hymn of Christ. You could call this the Hymn of Christ the King. The reading for today is from Colossians 1:12-20. This passage is well known among Pauline scholars as a hymn or a song which is either being composed by Paul extemporaneously, or which, as more people tend to think, reflects one of the hymns of Christ that was sung in the early Church. Elsewhere, in Paul's letters, in the letters to the Corinthians in particular, he'll talk about how when they gather together, each person will have a psalm or a hymn that can be sung. The psalms were chanted in synagogues, but hymns were independent compositions. They were songs that were written by artists, ancient Jewish men or women, who would compose music and then sing. People would learn the songs and they would chant them together in the context of the liturgical celebrations, just as we do today. In the mass, you'll have the Responsorial Psalm, which is us singing a hymn composed by God in the sense that it's part of inspired scripture, but then we'll also have hymns and chants that are part of the human tradition of the Church.

In this case, some scholars speculate that when you get to this section of Paul's letter, there's a poetic form to this section of the letter that justifies suggesting or postulating that what we might have here is an excerpt or a transcription by Paul of the words of a hymn that would've been sung in the early Church. A hymn about Christ that, in a sense, summarizes the Christology, the doctrine of Jesus that was part of the early Church in the first century at the time of St. Paul, and, apparently,

would've been familiar, we think, to the church of Colossae, to the Colossians. So Paul might be summarizing a hymn or repeating the words of a hymn that was known to them. Because in the Church of Colossae, there's apparently some errors that have made their way in about the person and mission of Christ. And so Paul here is not just going to correct those Christological errors by means of his own didactic teaching, he's going to use this hymn to illustrate the mystery of Christ's person and mission. That's just a little background here, but that's what we're about to read. With that in mind, in Colossians 1:12-20, we read these words:

...giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.¹

A beautiful summary. You can almost hear it has a similar function to the Creed. It should remind you a little bit of the Creed, these summary statements of who Jesus was and what He has done, not only in Himself, but for us and for the cosmos, for the universe; a very cosmic character to this hymn. For our purposes here, we'll just break down some of the basic elements of the hymn. You can divide up its statements into basically four or five main categories. Number one, it teaches us about creation. Number two, it teaches us about Christ, what we would call Christology in the theological realm. Number three, it teaches us about soteriology. Namely, how we are saved? Number four, it teaches us about Ecclesiology, what's the nature or mystery of the Church? And then number five, it also says a little bit about Eschatology. Namely, what is going to happen in the end times at the end of days?

¹ Pius XI, Encyclical *Quas Primas*, On the Feast of Christ the King [December 11, 1925], no. 1

Let's just work through all of those briefly in the hymn. We'll just go through it in order. Paul says:

...giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Notice, it starts off with a soteriological and ecclesiological statement. It teaches us about what it means to be part of the Church and how we're saved. The image here that he uses for the Church is our sharing in "the inheritance of the saints in light." That's beautiful. This is one of the few times in Paul where he uses the expression, the saints, or literally in Greek, the holy ones, to refer to what appears to be the souls or the persons who are in heaven rather than on earth. Normally, when Paul uses the expression, "the saints," it's just a term that he means for the baptized, for those who are in the Church. He'll talk about, "to the saints who are in the church at Corinth." He means the baptized believers in Corinth. But here, when he talks about "the saints in light," it evokes an imagery, for example, from the book of Daniel, which talks about the holy ones and the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven. That terminology of the holy ones can be used to refer to the holy angels or to the holy souls of the righteous who are with God, who are somehow members of His Heavenly Kingdom. So here, Paul describes becoming a Christian as being someone who has an inheritance, but not an earthly inheritance, but rather a heavenly inheritance of the saints in the light who live in the light of God.

With regard to soteriology, how we're saved, you'll notice he describes salvation as deliverance "from dominion of darkness" and a transferal into the "kingdom of His beloved Son". Now, this is something I think most of us, at least as modern Christians, we don't tend to think of salvation naturally or reflexively as a transfer from one sphere of reality into another reality, but that's how Paul describes it. We often think of salvation as...we'll think of it as a legal transaction, where I have this debt of sin and God forgives it, or we might think of it as an eschatological reality, where now I'm on earth, but I hope I'll get to heaven one day. And so after I die, I go to heaven. That's what salvation is. But Paul sees it here as actually a transferal from being under the power of darkness and becoming a member of the kingdom of the Son. Originally, you were under the power of sin and death and darkness, but with your baptism and through faith, you've been moved into another sphere of reality, into the kingdom of the Son. This is something that lines up very well with what we've seen elsewhere in Paul, where he talks about becoming a

believer as being a member in Christ, as becoming part of the body of Christ. Here, he uses the imagery of the Kingdom, but it's basically a different way of saying the same thing. Transferal from the kingdom of Satan into the kingdom of the Son. That's what salvation is all about. It's a beautiful hymn. The way we have it is through the redemption and the forgiveness of our sins that was purchased by the Blood of the Cross. How does Christ do that? What has the power to bring us from the dominion of darkness into the inheritance of the saints in light, it's the power of the blood of Christ.

The heart of the hymn, in the next few verses is really about Christology, and that's what most of the hymn is about. It's about who is Christ. Now, on the one hand, Paul appears to describe Jesus as the perfect human being. When he says:

He is the image of the invisible God

Any first century Jewish reader would hear an echo of the book of Genesis. If you recall in the book of Genesis 1, when God creates man and woman, it says, "He made man and woman in His image and likeness." And so, that's an Adamic term. When Paul describes Jesus as the image of God, in effect, what he's doing is saying that Christ is the new Adam. He's the new man. He's the beginning of a new humanity and the inauguration of a new creation, which, if you've seen any of my other videos on Paul, this is a constant theme in the Pauline letters. However, Paul isn't only saying that Jesus is the perfect man or the new Adam or the beginning of a new humanity, he is also saying that He's fully divine. If you keep reading here, he goes on to say:

in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

Now pause there, what's he talking about when he says thrones, dominions, principalities, power. What's that a name for? Well, if you look at the other letters of Paul, Paul made this very clear that these are his terms for the angelic powers. These are different categories of the invisible spirits that we refer to as the angels. On the one hand, Christ is a new Adam. He's a human being. He's the image of God. On the other hand, He's also above all of the creatures of the world. He's, in fact, the One through whom creation came into being. He's the One through whom the angels were created. He is both a human being and a super angelic being. If you think about it in terms of the divide between creature and creator, on the one

hand as a human being, he has a created human nature. On the other hand, he's the creator. He's the one through whom the world is made. I mean, who is this man? How can He be both fully human and fully divine or super angelic? Well, Paul goes on to describe, because:

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

And then, in verse 19:

in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell

What does that mean? Well, if you keep reading in the letter to the Colossians, you'll see...literally what it says here in the Greek is, "in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell." It just says the fullness, the *plērōma* in Greek. What Paul means by that isn't made explicit until you go a few verses down in chapter two, verse nine, he actually makes clear that he means all the fullness of God. Literally, the fullness of deity, dwell in Him bodily. This is a Pauline way of referring to what John would call the incarnation. The fact that Jesus isn't just the highest creature among all the other creatures, like Arius would later say Him to be. But rather, He is God Himself in bodily form. He has taken on a human nature. As the new Adam, He is also the One in whom the fullness of deity dwells bodily, and the one through whom every other creature in the world was made. For that reason, according to the Colossians Hymn, He's able to reconcile not just mankind, not just humanity to God, but all of creation is, so to speak, going to be under the dominion of Christ. That's why he says,=:

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Now, whenever you see that expression "all things" in Paul, the Greek is *ta panta*. It literally means all things or everything, but it's a way of referring idiomatically to the cosmos. If we want to talk about everything that is, we'll usually use the expression the universe. In the first century AD, the writers of the New Testament will say *tapánta*, the everything, or all things. So the picture here of Christ in the Colossians Hymn is powerful, because it's not just He's the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One, it's that He's the Cosmic Redeemer. He is, as some scholarship referred to it as, the Cosmic Christ. Because he's not just the Lord of the Church or the Lord of Israel, He's not even just the Lord of the Angels. He's the Lord of the Universe. He's the One through whom the entire universe was made. He's the One

who reigns over the universe as Christ, the King, as God and man who has made peace through “the blood of his Cross.”

As soon as you see that emphasis on all things, all things, all things, all things, as the one who is the head of the body of the Church, and in whom all of the universe holds together. Now, you know why this is the reading for today. Because on the Feast of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, what the Church is doing at the end of the liturgical year, as we bring the liturgical year to a close and on the cusp of advent, when we began to reflect on the second coming of Jesus as Lord of the Cosmos, the Church reminds us that Jesus isn't just the Savior of Israel, he isn't just the Savior of the Church, he's not just the Savior of you and me, he's the Lord of the entire universe. He's the King of the Cosmos. That's always something we need to be reminded of, and thanks be to God that in this beautiful hymn from Colossians 1, the Church gives us that reminder by sharing with us this excerpt from the letters of St. Paul.

I'll close then with a word from the living tradition, as I always do, about the mystery of Christ that is given to us here in the Colossians Hymn. This is from St. Gregory Nazianzus, who most people aren't likely to be familiar with, but Gregory Nazianzus, he was one of the Cappadocian Fathers, one of the fourth century Church fathers who was very, very famous. He was the one who was called Gregory, the Theologian. Again, when you see the word, "the great" after the name of a saint, always good indicator that they're special. The other one is, if you see the term, "the theologian", because what the theologian means is that they penetrated the mystery of the person of Christ and the Trinity in a unique way. You'll only see this title, the theologian, given to a few people. One of the other ones who gets that title is St. John, the Evangelist. In the East, they'll often refer to him as John, the Theologian, because his gospel, out of all four, penetrates the mystery and reveals the mystery of the Trinity with the most clarity and depth and profundity. Anyway, St. Gregory, the Theologian, said this in his theological orations about the language of Paul in the Colossian Hymn about Christ as the image of God and as King of the Cosmos. This is what St. Gregory said:

He is called “image” because he is of one substance with the Father; he stems from the Father and not the Father from him, it begin the nature of an image to copy the original and to be named after it. But there is more to it than this. The ordinary image is a motionless copy of a moving being. Here we have a living image of a living being, indistinguishable from its original to a higher degree than Seth from Adam (cf. Gen 5:3) and any earthly offspring from its parents.

Pause there for a second. What Gregory is alluding to, is if you go back to the book of Genesis, the other time the word image is used is in Genesis 5, in the genealogy of Adam, when it says, “When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created. When Adam had lived a hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth. “ So the language of image isn't just evocative of Adam. What Gregory's pointing out is that in the Bible, in the Old Testament, image is the way you describe a son in his relation to a father. We still do this to this day. I mean, if a father looks like his son, we'll say he's the spitting image. Not as eloquent, but he's the spitting image of his dad. Well, that's what Gregory is saying here about not just Adam and Seth, but he's saying it about Christ and the Father, the Son and the Father, except that he is in the image of the Father to a greater degree than any living being, is the image of its parent.

Beings with no complexity to their nature have no points of likeness or unlikeness. They are exact replicas, identical rather than like.²

Here what Gregory is trying to point out is that when we talk of Christ as the image of the Father, He's the image of the Father in a perfect way, in an inexpressible way, in an inestimable way that goes above even the images we see in the creaturely realm. That's why at the end of the day, Jesus can say to the Apostles, "He who has seen me has seen the Father," because He is the One who bears the image of the Father from all eternity as Christ, the King of the Universe.

² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Theological Orations* 30.20; trans. F. W. Norris.