

# 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 liturgical Year C comes to its climax and its close—like every other liturgical year—with the Solemnity of our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe. This Solemnity is commonly called the feast of Christ the King. It's the last Sunday... technically, it's in Ordinary Time...it's at the end of Ordinary Time. It's the last Sunday before we begin a new liturgical year with the first Sunday of Advent. And so the Church, what she does is, as She's moved throughout the Gospel—in this year, the Gospel of Luke, looking at the public ministry of Jesus Christ—She brings that journey with Christ to its end by looking (in a sense) upward and forward to His eternal reign as King of the Universe. And so before I look at the Gospel today, what I'd like to do is just give you a little bit of background real quick about this particular Solemnity.

It's one of those Solemnities that I think we're all familiar with, right? The feast of Christ the King...but we might not necessarily know the origins of it. And this feast is interesting because it was instituted in the 20th century. It's a relatively recent Solemnity. It was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925. And in his encyclical on the feast of Christ the King, this is what he says about the feast day. So just listen for a moment, and I want you to hear these words as the context for the readings we're going to look at today. The pope said this, Pope Pius XI in 1925:

In the first Encyclical Letter which We addressed at the beginning of Our Pontificate to the Bishops of the universal Church, We referred to the chief causes of the difficulties under which mankind was laboring. And We remember saying that these manifold evils in the world were due to the fact that the majority of men had thrust Jesus Christ and his holy law out of their lives; that these had no place either in private affairs or in politics: and we said further, that as long as individuals and states refused to submit to the rule of our Savior, there would be no really hopeful prospect of a lasting peace among nations. Men must look for the peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ; and that We promised to do as far as lay in Our power. In the Kingdom of Christ, that is, it seemed to Us that peace could not be more effectually restored nor fixed upon a firmer basis than through the restoration of the Empire of Our Lord.<sup>1</sup>

Alright, so that's how Pius XI begins his encyclical instituting the feast of Christ the King. Now this encyclical was released in 1925, so think about what the world stage looked like in the early 1920s. You have just come out of the first great World War, this massive conflict of nations in which untold numbers of human beings were killed as a result of the strife of the nations of the world, especially in Europe. And so what the pope is saying here is that the chief cause, the reason for all of the evil that you see at the beginning of the 20th century, is that people have thrust the kingship of Christ not only out of their private lives, but out of their political lives as well—out of the realm of politics, out of the realm of the nations of the world, the governance of the nations.

I just want you to think about the beginning of the 20th century and what the pope is addressing here with the spread of atheistic communism and socialism. For the first time in a very long time in Europe's history, you have nations establishing themselves without any reference to the reign and the Lordship of Jesus Christ. So in the context of the conflict of the kingdoms of the world, Pope Pius XI institutes a feast, a Solemnity, to lift up the fact that above all the nations of the world, there stands one King and one King only—and that is Jesus Christ, the King of the Universe. And the pope thought that it would be good for the liturgical year to end

---

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

with this reminder that Jesus is in fact not just the Lord of church or the King of believers, but in fact the King of the Universe. So with that in mind, let's look at the readings for the feast of Jesus Christ, the Lord, the King of the Universe and see how these readings fit into Pope Pius XI's desire to lift up Jesus' Kingship, His Universal Kingship over the whole created world. And so at first glance, it might seem a little counterintuitive because the reading chosen for today on the feast of Jesus' Kingship is the account of the crucifixion.

Now wait a second. Shouldn't it be an account of His second coming or His coming in glory? Why do we pick this passage? Well let's look at it and maybe we can figure it out. In Luke 23:35-43 we read these words:

And the people stood by, watching; but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him vinegar, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."<sup>2</sup>

Alright, let's pause there. Kind of a strange reading for the feast of Christ the King, but upon further reflection, a very crucial one for several reasons. First, notice here the context of the Gospel for today is the passion and death of Jesus on the cross; it's the crucifixion. And the reading begins with the people watching and the rulers scoffing at Jesus, saying:

---

<sup>2</sup> 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.

He saved others. Let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!

So the first point here is that when the rulers of the people look at Jesus on the cross, they don't see a king. They see a criminal. In order to understand this, it's important to remember that in the first century AD, crucifixion was used by the Roman Empire not just as a standard method of execution for just anyone. Rather, it was the standard method of execution for slaves. So for example, in the Roman Empire there were different categories of citizenry. If you were a formal citizen of the Empire, like St. Paul, if you were a Roman citizen, then you could not actually be put to death by crucifixion. It was considered beneath a citizen, so the proper form of execution for a citizen of the Empire was decapitation. It was beheading.

Now that might seem more terrifying to you, but it was considered a more noble way of dying. So for example, when Paul (who was a citizen of the Roman Empire) is brought to Rome, and under the reign of Caesar Nero is eventually martyred, is eventually executed, he is beheaded. He's executed by decapitation. Whereas Peter, who was just a lowly Jew from Galilee, when he ends up in Rome in the 60s of the first century AD, and he is martyred and put to death, his method of execution is not decapitation because he's not a citizen. He's a slave of the Empire, therefore he's put to death by crucifixion. And according to ancient tradition, Peter chose to be crucified upside down so that his death would be even more humiliating.

So in a first century Jewish context, the first aspect of the reading here that's striking is that Christ on a cross does not look like a king—He looks like a slave. And that's why the rulers of the people and the crowds are mocking Him, saying:

He saved others. Let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!

Now I've said this hundreds of times, but I'm going to probably say it thousands more before I die, but it's really important to remember that the word Christ is not Jesus' name; it's a title. *Christos* means the "anointed one." And the anointed one here is a reference to the King, so it's a shorthand way for referring to Him as a

king, if you call him *christos*, if you call him the anointed one. So just like presidents in the United States are inaugurated, they're installed into their office, in antiquity, the kings of Israel would be anointed. That's how they would rise to the office of king. They would be installed as king through an act of anointing.

So when the rulers look at Jesus and say, "This guy can't be the *christos*. He can't be the anointed one," they say that because He is taking the form of a slave. He's being executed as a slave, as a criminal, not as a king. And so they're basically taunting him, saying, "Look, if you're really God's king, God's Chosen One, why don't you save yourself?"

Second, the soldiers here also mock Him. And remember, these are the nations of the world. The soldiers here are Roman soldiers, so they're pagans. And they're saying:

If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!

And there was even an inscription put over Him, as we know from other Gospels, by Pontius Pilate, saying "This is the King of the Jews." Now remember, this was meant to mock Jesus. Pilate is not confessing his faith in Jesus' Messiahship by having the title, the placard, put above the cross. It's meant to mock Him and say, "Oh, you claim to be a king...well, I'll show you what kind of king you are. I'll hang you on a cross and let you asphyxiate to death."

Now in that context here, there are two criminals that have also been crucified with Jesus. And it says that:

One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the [*crastos*]? Save yourself and us!"

In other words, "If you're the king, do something here! Kings are supposed to be powerful. Why can't you save us?"

But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?"

“We’re here justly.” In other words, we’ve done something that deserves this. But this man is innocent. And at this moment, he says something powerful. It’s one of my favorite lines in the Gospels:

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

Now I have to point this out here. It’s unfortunate...the Revised Standard Version here makes one of the worst translation mistakes anywhere in the New Testament. It literally says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingly power.” That’s a bad translation. The Greek word here is *basileia*. It just means “kingdom.” But in the early 20th...not really 20th century. In the mid-20th century, when the Revised Standard Version was being translated, the idea had become very popular that in the New Testament, the word “kingdom” did not refer to a place but to a state. You’ll sometimes hear people translate it as “the reign of God”—that was very popular in the 1960s and 70s, because it meant to kind of convey the fact that God’s kingdom is a dynamic state, where He exercises His rule; He exercises His reign. In other words, wherever God is reigning—whether it be in your heart or in a particular country or in a particular place—where He is reigning, there is His kingdom. So there was kind of a resistance of seeing the kingdom as a locale.

The problem with that is—although that is true, sometimes when the verb or the noun is used for kingship or kingdom—in this context, it’s very clear here that the thief is using the term *basileia*, kingdom, to refer to a realm into which Jesus will enter after His death. And Jesus actually confirms that because when He responds to the thief, what does He say? “Truly, Amen”—which is like “so be it”—He affirms it!

“I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Now the Greek word there, *paradeisos*, is literally the word for “garden.” It’s taken from the Greek translation of the book of Genesis, the description of Eden. So in the Hebrew Bible, it says that the Lord God planted a garden in Eden. In the Greek translation of that, it says the Lord God planted a paradise in Eden—or a *paradeisos*. It’s a reference to actually like an orchard. And so by the first century

AD, this term *paradeisos* (or paradise) was just another way of referring to Eden and to the place of peace and righteousness and holiness in which Adam and Eve were constituted at the beginning of creation before the fall—and which, in Jewish eschatology, would return in the age to come. There was an idea that the end of time would be like the beginning of time. That although we were living in this old creation, this fallen world now, one day there would be a new world, the world to come, in which paradise would be restored.

You might think of Milton's famous poem, you know, *Paradise Lost*—or paradise then restored. So the thief here and Jesus are just speaking in two different ways about the same thing. The thief is talking about the kingdom of God that was expected to come at the end of the age. Jesus responds, "...today you will be with me in Paradise." So why is this important? Well, it's crucial because it reveals the nature of Jesus' kingdom. So what kind of king is Jesus and where is His kingdom? Well, it's not a kingdom of this world. It's not a this worldly kingdom. You can actually see this really clear in the parallel to this passage in the Gospel of John. It's not here in Luke, but in the Gospel of John, you might recall, Pilate asked Jesus, "So you are a king?" And Jesus says, "Yes, but my kingdom is not of this world"—same Greek word, *basileia*.

So Jesus is a king, but He's not an earthly king. He does have a kingdom, but it's not an earthly kingdom. It's not a kingdom of this world. So there's the paradox of the cross, here, and of the kingship of Jesus Christ. On Earth, where does Jesus reign? He reigns from the throne of the cross. This is how He is exalted as king. It's precisely through His death on the cross; it's through His crucifixion.

Now, okay, I'll pause there. Let's go back to the Old Testament. You'll see that this theme of kingship for today is also present in the readings from the Old Testament. If you go back to 2 Samuel 5:1-3, we have the Old Testament reading for today. And the Church here has chosen as background for Jesus' crucifixion, the account of David being anointed king over Israel. So let's look at that together. In 2 Samuel 5 we read these words:

Then all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, "Behold, we are your bone and flesh. In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was

you that led out and brought in Israel; and the Lord said to you, ‘You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.’” So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the Lord, and they anointed David king over Israel.

Now the lectionary stops here, but I really wish they didn’t—although nobody asked me, right? Because in the next few verses, it says a couple more things about David. I’m just going to add in here. It says:

David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years. At Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months; and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years.

Okay, so let me pause there. A couple elements here that are worth highlighting about this passage. Number one, it says “all the tribes of Israel came to David.” So in order to be the king over Israel, you can’t just be the king of Judah or the king of Benjamin or the king of Asher or the king of Issachar or the king of Naphtali—whatever, pick a tribe, pick whatever tribe you like. Although don’t pick Dan, because according to the early Church Fathers, the antichrist is supposed to come from the tribe of Dan. So any tribe but Dan. He’s also missing from the list of tribes in the book of Revelation, but I digress...I’ll leave that out.

In order to be king of Israel, you had to be the king over all twelve tribes. First point. So notice, when Jesus comes onto the scene in the Gospels, the Gospel of Luke, what does He immediately begin to do? Gather twelve apostles. What do they represent? The twelve tribes of Israel. So already you can see Jesus sees Himself not just as any king, but as the Davidic king over all twelve tribes.

Second point. Notice that they say “we are your bone and flesh.” What does that mean, we are your bone and flesh? Well, go back to the book of Genesis, in Genesis 2, when Adam discovers Eve, what does he say?

“[Here] at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”



So the first image of bone and flesh, it's a bridal image; it's a nuptial image of the covenant between Adam and Eve, of the marriage between Adam and Eve. When Adam says to Eve, "you are my flesh and bone", he's saying, "You are my wife. You are my bride." So it's fascinating here that the twelve tribes gather with King David and say "we are your bone and your flesh." It's fascinating why? Well, because if you look at the Old Testament over and over again, Israel collectively is described as the bride of God. She's in a nuptial relationship. God is the bridegroom, Israel is the bride. I wrote a whole book on this. You can check it out, *Jesus the Bridegroom: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told*.

So the tribes here are describing themselves as the bride. In a sense, David is the bridegroom king. Very interesting. So that's the second element here. A third element here, and if you have any doubts about there being a covenant, what does it say?

...David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the Lord...

So not only do the twelve tribes (in a sense) enter into this covenant relationship with David as king, he solidifies that relationship through the very language of a covenant, and they respond by anointing David king over Israel. So that third element is the anointing. In other words, David is the *christos* of the Old Testament. He's the anointed one. In Hebrew, he's the *mashiach*. He's the messiah. So when the rulers and the crowds refer to Jesus as the anointed one mockingly, in a Jewish context that doesn't just mean any anointed one, it means the Davidic king. By means of the consecration through oil, David is made king over the people of Israel. He's formally installed as king.

And then fourth and finally, this is just really fascinating. When does David become king? Well, when he's 30 years old. Now in the United States, that would be too young to be the president, but not in ancient Israel. David was considered ready to be king when he was 30 years old. And the reason that's so significant for us looking at the Gospel today is that the Gospel of Luke—and it's Luke alone in his account of the genealogy of Jesus—tells us that Jesus began His ministry when he was 30 years old. That's not a coincidence. Luke is highlighting the parallel

between Jesus and David. So Jesus, in the Gospel of Luke, is a new David. He's the Anointed One. He's the bridegroom of the new people of God. And the wedding between Christ and His Church, He's going to establish that covenant at the Last Supper—they'll gather around Him, the twelve disciples—and then of course, above all, on the cross where He will reign through love, by making His life an offering for many and establishing the New Covenant in His blood.

Alright, so beautiful background, very rich Old Testament text there about David being anointed king of Israel. Now in terms of the bridge between the Old and New Testaments, the bridge for today is Psalm 122. Beautiful psalm. If you look at the heading of Psalm 122 in a Bible, you're going to see it's going to refer to itself as a "song of ascents of David." What does that mean, a song of ascents? Well, there were certain psalms in the Old Testament that would be sung as the people were ascending the stairs of the temple, as the priests were going up the stairs of the temple, in order to offer sacrifice at the festivals. So the psalm would be chanted when the priest was going up the stairs of the sanctuary to offer sacrifice, and they would be chanted as the pilgrims were coming into the city of Jerusalem, ascending into the temple to worship.

And in this case, the psalm is all about the gathering of the twelve tribes of Israel into Jerusalem. So just listen for a second, this is what it says:

I was glad when they said to me,  
"Let us go to the house of the Lord!"

That means the temple.

Our feet have been standing  
within your gates, O Jerusalem!

Jerusalem, built as a city  
which is bound firmly together,  
to which the tribes go up,  
the tribes of the Lord,  
as was decreed for Israel,

to give thanks to the name of the Lord.  
There thrones for judgment were set,  
the thrones of the house of David.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!  
“May they prosper who love you!  
Peace be within your walls,  
and security within your towers!”  
For my brethren and companions’ sake  
I will say, “Peace be within you!”  
For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,  
I will seek your good.

Now I read the whole psalm to you for two reasons. First, I just want you to kind of imagine pilgrims singing this as they journey up to Jerusalem. It’s a beautiful, powerful psalm. But secondly, I wanted to highlight—notice what’s going on here. It’s a song of hope for the gathering of the tribes going up to Jerusalem in the name of the Lord where thrones were being set for the house of David. So, in the first century AD, as you might recall I’ve mentioned elsewhere, ten of the twelve tribes are lost. They’ve been scattered to the four winds, right? But when certain psalms would be sung, like Psalm 122, there was a hope that one day when the Messiah would come and sit on the throne of David, He wouldn’t just reestablish the kingdom of David, He would gather the twelve tribes into a new Jerusalem that would be even more glorious, even more beautiful, even more splendid than the Jerusalem of Solomon had ever been. And when you saw that king, that Davidic king, exalted to His throne — as it mentions here — you would know that the restoration of Jerusalem and the ingathering of the tribes of Israel was finally at hand.

So it’s a very glorious vision of the coming of a new Jerusalem, the gathering of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the coming of the Messiah. So you can understand why when Jesus came onto the scene in the first century AD, if people were used to chanting psalms like this in the temple, why they were waiting for Him to bring about this kind of visible, public, and even this worldly restoration of a kingdom that would look like the kingdom of David (that David had exercised in Jerusalem

of old). And yet, when you get to the public ministry of Jesus and you get to the Gospel of Luke, what happens? Yes, Jesus gathers twelve disciples around Him. Yes, He performs signs and wonders that indicate His power. But when He actually ends up going to Jerusalem, and everyone would imagine that would be where He would establish His throne instead of His kingdom, what ends up happening instead? He's arrested, He's charged with blasphemy, He's led out to a wooden cross where they would crucify and execute criminals and slaves, and He's hung there to die by the Roman authorities.

This is not what people were expecting. This is not what people were waiting for. This is not the kind of king that they thought would reign based on the psalms, like Psalm 122, or based on even the reign of David, who was a warrior messiah, who was a warrior king. So what's the upshot of all this? Taken together, what it shows us is something ironic, something paradoxical, but profoundly true. Namely this: the way that Jesus is installed as king, so to speak, is not just through His Baptism. Yes, He's anointed with the Spirit at His Baptism, but the Baptism itself, going down into the waters of the Jordan, is a sign of Him being baptized with suffering, of being immersed in the waters of His crucifixion, in which He will reign as king, precisely through the cross.

And the amazing thing here, the powerful thing about the Gospel for today, is that somehow, through the grace of God's illumination, the thief who sees Jesus looking like a criminal who's been executed, somehow sees that He is in fact the true King. And so when he says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," he is somehow seeing through the visible figure in front of him—who looks like any other crucified Jew by the Roman Empire—to the invisible reality that He is in fact the *christos*, the anointed one, and that He is going to reign, but that His kingdom is not of this world, but it's a heavenly kingdom. And in response to that act of faith, Jesus says, "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise. You will be with me in my kingdom."

In closing then, what should we say about that? I'd like to end with one more quote from Pope Pius XI, and I know the language is a little archaic, but I really want to ponder this. What does it mean to call Jesus Christ your King? What does that mean for Christians today, living in the world today? I think, at least, in my

experience, many Christians (in the secular west in particular) are very comfortable referring to Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. “He loved me and He gave Himself for me”, which is absolutely true...referring to Jesus as the Messiah, the long-awaited King of Israel, the long-awaited Son of God, the divine Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, who has become flesh and dwelt among us. I think all those images we’re comfortable with, but maybe we’re less inclined to think of Jesus as our King, especially if you live in a secular democracy or contemporary modern republic, and you don’t have a king—maybe you have a president or a prime minister. It can be sometimes difficult to translate that language into today. What does it mean for us today?

So I’d like to end with a quote from Pope Pius XI. He’s the one who instituted this Solemnity, so let’s listen to what he says about its implications for the modern world and why it’s so important for us to remember, in the modern world, that Jesus Christ isn’t just our personal Lord and Savior. He’s not just a divine Son of God, He’s also the King of the Universe. This is what the pope says:

If We ordain that the whole Catholic world shall revere Christ as King, We shall minister to the need of the present day, and at the same time provide an excellent remedy for the plague which now infects society.... The empire of Christ over all nations was rejected. The right which the Church has from Christ himself, to teach mankind, to make laws, to govern peoples in all that pertains to their eternal salvation, that right was denied. Then gradually the religion of Christ came to be likened to false religions and to be placed ignominiously on the same level with them. It was then put under the power of the state and tolerated more or less at the whim of princes and rulers. Some men went even further, and wished to set up in the place of God's religion a natural religion consisting in some instinctive affection of the heart. There were even some nations who thought they could dispense with God, and that their religion should consist in impiety and the neglect of God. The rebellion of individuals and states against the authority of Christ has produced deplorable consequences...

Again, think here of the First World War.

...the seeds of discord sown far and wide; those bitter enmities and rivalries between nations, which still hinder so much the cause of peace; that insatiable greed which is so often hidden under a pretense of public spirit and patriotism, and gives rise to so many private quarrels; a blind and immoderate selfishness, making men seek nothing but their own comfort and advantage, and measure everything by these; no peace in the home, because men have forgotten or neglect their duty; the unity and stability of the family undermined; society in a word, shaken to its foundations and on the way to ruin.

This is in 1925.

We firmly hope, however, that the feast of the Kingship of Christ, which in the future will be yearly observed, may hasten the return of society to our loving Savior.<sup>3</sup>

That's Pius XI, 1925, encyclical on the feast of Christ the King. And that's why the liturgy to this day, if you listen to the prayer over the offerings for this feast of Christ the King, what does the Church say? That's it's...

...right and just, our duty and our salvation ...to give you thanks, Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God.

For making our Lord Jesus Christ “King of all creation” and Lord over “an eternal and universal kingdom...”

A kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace.

I don't know about you, but that's really powerful. It's really moving to me to think about what the Holy Father, Pope Pius XI, was really doing with this feast. What he was doing was he was reminding the world that not only do we need Christ as individuals, but that the world needs to recognize Jesus Christ, not just as the king

---

<sup>3</sup> Pius XI, Encyclical *Quas Primas*, On the Feast of Christ the King [December 11, 1925], no. 1

of Israel or the king of the Gentiles or the king of the Church, but as the King of the Universe. And whether it happens today or tomorrow, one day, as St. Paul says, it's going to be brought to its fullness. Because as he says in Philippians 2, one day, in that day, the last day, "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess, whether in the earth or above the earth or under the earth, that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."