

# **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 reigns; 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>	And those who went before and those who followed cried out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!
<i>Gospel</i>	John 18:33b-3

The Solemnity of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, for year B is the last day, so to speak, of Ordinary Time before we begin the season of Advent. And the Church always brings the liturgical year to this climax with the feast of ... often called the feast of Christ the King, which has some wonderful readings chosen for the feast day. And in particular for this year, for year B, we have a great passage from the book of Revelation, the Apocalypse of St. John — chapter 1, verses 5-8. And you’ll see really quickly why the Church chose this particular reading for the feast of Christ the King. It says this:

... from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

And then it concludes:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.<sup>1</sup>

You get a great taste there of the gravity and solemnity of the Apocalypse of John — one of my favorite books in the New Testament, the first book of the New Testament I ever read as a kid. It was awesome — scary, but awesome.

So what’s going on here with this opening chapter? A few things I would highlight. First, number one: notice that John is referring in an apocalyptic way to the death and resurrection of Christ. So he refers to His death when he calls Him “the faithful witness”, because the Greek word for witness is *martyr*. So He is the faithful martyr, but He’s also the firstborn of the dead. He’s the first one to be raised from the dead in the resurrection that will inaugurate the age to come in the end of time.

And then the third title John gives to Him here is of course the one that I think is the reason for the Church picking this passage for the feast of Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, where John calls Jesus “the ruler of kings on earth”.

Now let me pause there for a second. Is that how you think of Jesus? In modern Christianity, we have certain titles of Jesus that we gravitate toward or that we feel more comfortable with, like Jesus Christ as the Son of God, Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior, Jesus our friend and brother. Those are very popular in modern Christian times, and they’re all rooted in Scripture in one way or another.

But when most people say to you, if somebody asks you a question, “Who is Jesus?”... would you say, “Well, He’s the ruler of the kings of earth?” Is that your go-to answer? And if it’s not, why not? And what does it mean to call Him the ruler of the kings of the earth?

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<sup>1</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.

In order to answer that question, it's always good to look at an expression like this in context. So the first thing I would say is, the book of Revelation itself is exceedingly focused on the kingship of Jesus Christ.

So for example, if you turn to Revelation chapter 17, verse 14, there's a famous passage that says — it talks about the enemies of God making “war on the Lamb”, which is a title for Jesus in the book of Revelation. And it says:

... the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings...

So very important title. Again, most people are familiar with that — Jesus is the King of kings. And what that means in the reading for today is that He is the ruler of kings on earth. In other words, all of the kings of this world — all of the presidents and prime ministers and potentates and kings and queens — they're all beneath Christ the King. He is the ruler of the kings of the earth.

For the book of Revelation to call Jesus king of kings, in a first century setting, would have had a particular connotation. It doesn't *just* mean that He's above all of the earthly kings. It's actually a little bit more than that. If you want to see this, you've got to go back to the book of Ezra, because this expression “king of kings” or “ruler of kings” actually occurs in the Old Testament. In the book of Ezra chapter 7, verses 11 and 12, there's a letter from the Persian emperor, King Ar-ta-xerx'es to Ezra the priest, and listen to what it says:

This is a copy of the letter which King Ar-ta-xerx'es gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in matters of the commandments of the Lord and his statutes for Israel: “Ar-ta-xerx'es, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven.

Alright, so pause there. Why does Ar-ta-xerx'es call himself “king of kings”? Is that just an honorific, is it just some kind of grandiose title? Or does it mean something specific? Well, the answer is it means something specific, because Ar-ta-xerx'es isn't just a local king over a local tribe or a local city. Ar-ta-xerx'es is the emperor. It's the Persian empire. Just like you had the Babylonian empire, you have the Persian empire. You have the Greek empire, and then you're going to

have the Roman empire. And the difference between a mere kingdom and a mere king and an empire and an emperor is that an empire is a kingdom that rules over other kingdoms. An empire is a kingdom that invades other kingdoms, takes over their territory and makes them its subjects.

So when Ar-ta-xerx'es says he's the king of kings, a legitimate English translation of that would be "Ar-ta-xerx'es the emperor to Ezra the priest". Alright, now fast forward back to the New Testament. When the reading for today from the book of Revelation calls Jesus the ruler of the kings of the earth, what it's essentially saying about Him and what it would have meant in a first century Jewish context is that Jesus isn't just the Son of God. He's not just the king of Israel, He's not just king of the Jews, He's not even just the king of the kingdom of Heaven. It's saying Jesus is the emperor. It's Christ the emperor, the ruler of the kings of the Earth. So when we talk about the kingdom of God — this is so crucial. The expression *basileia tou Theou*, kingdom of God, in context actually could be translated completely and legitimately as "the empire of God", because the kingdom of God isn't just a local kingdom. It is imperial; it seeks to dominate every kingdom and every king in the world and subjugate the entire Earth to the kingship of Jesus Christ.

Now as soon as I say that, you might think, "Whoa, that sounds like colonialism." And you'll see there's lots of studies these days on colonialism and postcolonialism going on. And those studies are all being carried out according to earthly categories, but when we talk about the kingdom of God as an empire, we have to remember it's different from every earthly empire. For one thing, it's peaceful in the way it conquers; it conquers through conversion. But in the second thing, it's ultimately heavenly in its origin and its nature.

So... at the same time though, in the modern period, we just lose this. We forget this. One of the most explosive aspects of the early Christian message was that as the Christians were going out and proclaiming Jesus not just to be the Messiah but to be the king of kings and lord of lords, in a first century Roman context and a Greco-Roman context, that would have been a politically explosive message, because what you're saying is, Jesus Christ our king, the Messiah, is greater than Caesar. He's above the emperor, and His kingdom (unlike Caesar's kingdom) is going to last forever. It's going to conquer Caesar's kingdom... which of course, if

I had more time I could show you, is one of the reasons I would suggest that Peter and Paul make a beeline for Rome, so to speak — why Rome is so important in early Christian missionary activity. It's not just because Rome is the central hub of the Roman empire, and if you want to influence the empire, you've got to influence Rome on an earthly level.

It's also because in the book of Daniel chapter 2, the most important prophecy of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament. The kingdom of God starts off small, like a little stone, and it hits this idol — this statue made of four different metals at the base of its foot. And then it brings that idolatrous statue to an end, and then it becomes ... it turns into a great mountain and spreads throughout the earth. And this is an apocalyptic way — remember this is Daniel, an apocalypse, we read in Revelation also an apocalypse — of describing how the four great empires of the Old Testament, which are depicted through the imagery of gold, silver, bronze, and iron... so the Babylonian, the Persian, the Greeks. I'm sorry — the Babylonian and the Medo-Persians, because they're together, the Greek and the Roman Empires... they are going to be transcended and conquered by the fifth great empire, and that is the empire of God.

This is what Revelation is assuming when it refers to Jesus as the ruler of the kings of the earth and king of kings. It's Jesus the emperor and Jesus the ruler of the empire of God.

Now if you have any doubts about that, you can actually see that the book of Revelation comes to a climax with this imperial, royal imagery of Jesus. In one of my favorite passages in Revelation, it's the apocalyptic description of Christ at the second coming. Listen to how it describes Christ coming in this great battle. Just enjoy this for a minute, Revelation 19:11. He says this:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself. He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the

armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white horses.

Pause there. If you're a first century writer, you're like, "Wait, is this Alexander the Great, or is this Jesus of Nazareth?" Every first century pagan for sure (and Jew as well) would have been familiar with the image of an emperor leading his army into battle to conquer his enemies. So:

... The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white horses. From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords.

So here we see the same expression again from the reading today. He's the ruler of the kings of the earth; He's the king of kings. And what's the context Revelation is using to describe Christ in that way? It's as the leader of a heavenly army that's coming to Earth to conquer the nations of the world. He's like Alexander the Great, sweeping across the ancient near east and conquering every territory he can encounter, leading his army into battle. The difference is this is a heavenly warfare. It's a spiritual battle, and Christ is the heavenly emperor, Christ is the heavenly king.

Also, just as a side note, you might note... it says... where does the name king of kings, where is it inscribed? It's on his thigh. So I always like to joke with my students. One of the things they always ask me these days: "Dr. Pitre, should we get tattoos? What's your opinion on tattoos?"

So I'll always take them to the book of Leviticus, which prohibits tattoos. Tattoos were taboo in ancient Judaism to be sure. So on the one hand, the Old Testament forbids tattoos. On the other hand, there is one tattoo mentioned in the New Testament, and that is the one by Jesus, that Jesus Himself has in the book of Revelation chapter 19.

So what I tell them is, “Look, if you want to get a tattoo, that’s up to you. But a word of warning — don’t get a tattoo that says ‘king of kings and lord of lords’. That tattoo is reserved to Jesus Christ, the ruler of the kings of the earth. Don’t get the Lord of lord’s tattoo.”

But it is fascinating, because the reason I read that is... is that how you think of Christ? Do you think of Him as the ruler of the kings of the earth? Do you think of Him as an emperor leading the armies of Heaven into battle to conquer the nations of the world for the sake of the Gospel? Because that’s what the New Testament describes Him as, and that’s what the Church is reminding us of on the feast of Christ the King. At the consummation and the apex of the liturgical year, after we’ve journeyed through the life and the death and the resurrection of Christ and His public ministry over the course of the entire liturgical year, the Church ends by reminding us — especially reminding us modern Christians — that Jesus Christ isn’t just the Messiah. He isn’t just the Savior. He isn’t just the Son of God, He’s isn’t just your friend, He isn’t just your brother. He’s also the emperor of the kingdom of God, and He has come to subjugate all the nations of the world to the Good News of the Gospel.

So there is a colonial element that’s intrinsic to Christianity insofar as Christianity is an imperial religion. It’s not content to rest on the kind of familial, intergenerational reception of local tradition... like “I’m a Catholic because my mom was a Catholic, my dad was a Catholic”. No, no, no. There’s a missionary impulse built into Christianity, that from an apocalyptic perspective is imperial in its character. But it’s not an earthly empire. It’s not like the Roman empire, it’s not like the Greek empire. It’s not like the British empire, because the wealth that this empire is after is not land. It’s not money. It’s souls. That’s what Christ comes into the world to do, to take (as He said), to bind the strong man — in the parable in the Gospels — and to steal his goods, his possessions. The strong man is an image there for Satan, and the possessions are an image for the souls of human beings.

So very powerful image from the book of Revelation that I wanted to reflect on for a minute and also to remember, that if Jesus is the ruler of the kings of the Earth, then the Gospel and the Church and our fidelity to the Gospel transcends every political affiliation we might have within the earthly sphere. He is the supreme

ruler. He is the supreme leader, and we should treat Him as such. And I think this is a powerful and important corrective to modern Christianity, which tends to — in the wake of the enlightenment — privatize Christianity, like “You’ve got your faith; I’ve got my faith” and there isn’t a universal component to it.

That’s not the faith of the New Testament. The faith of the New Testament — remember, the proclamation of Jesus is focused almost entirely on the *basileo tou Theou*, on the empire of God. And this is what Jesus comes to proclaim, this is what He comes to inaugurate, and this is what the Church’s mission is to fulfill... is to prepare the world for the moment when every knee shall bend and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ (not Caesar) is *kurios*, Lord to the glory of God the Father.

In closing, the last verse of the reading for today is fascinating. How can we say such things about this man from Nazareth? And He’s the ruler of the kings of the Earth? Well, verse 8, it says Jesus speaks as:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Now in order to understand what this means, you just need to know a little Greek. The Alpha, A, is the first letter of the Greek alphabet. And the Omega, or O, is the last letter of the Greek alphabet. So what Christ is saying, what the Lord is saying in this verse is: “I’m the beginning, and I’m the end.” You’ll actually see this a little later in Revelation chapter 22. Christ will say:

“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” (Revelation 22:12-13)

So this is just one more testament to the fact that unlike every other king that ever lived in time who had a beginning (they were conceived) and they had an end when they died, Jesus is an eternal king. He is the beginning and the end; He’s the alpha and the omega. He’s the first and the last. So when all the other kings of the



Earth have been dethroned, Christ will reign eternal forever and ever in His kingdom, the empire of God.

Alright, one last point from the living tradition. There's a... if you're interested in the book of Revelation, one of the oldest commentaries we have in the western tradition is by St. Bede — his *Commentary on Revelation*. So Bede is a Doctor of the Church from... a medieval Doctor of the Church. He's from the land of England. I was just talking about the empire of Great Britain. And Bede is a wonderful, wonderful author, and in his commentary on Revelation, this is what he says about the meaning of alpha and omega. How can Christ be the alpha and omega? Bede answers:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End” (Rev 1:8). He is the Beginning whom no one precedes; he is the End whom no one in the kingdom succeeds...

He has no successor, in other words.

“I am the first and the last” (Rev 1:17). He is the first because “*all things were made through him*” (John 1:3). He is the last because *all things are restored in him*.<sup>2</sup>

And that's the truth. Christ the King is first and last. He's the alpha because He's also the creator. Everything was made through Him. And He's the omega because He's the consummator. Through Him, creation itself, the world itself, will be restored and exalted in the new and heavenly Jerusalem in the eternal kingdom of Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> Bede, *Commentary on Revelation* 1:8; 1:17; trans. W. C. Weinrich