

## **CHRIST THE KING YEAR B 2009 HOMILY**

**(Daniel 7: 13-14; Revelation 1: 5-8; John 18: 33b-37)**

### **CHRIST IS THE KING OF TRUTH**

I once had the opportunity to visit the ruins of the Coliseum in Rome. As I was tramping through the place, I was amazed at its impressive size and its classic beauty. I also could not help but think of all the inhumanity that occurred there – the fights to the death of the slaves known as gladiators and the no-holds-barred chariot races. Of course, I especially called to mind the spectacles in which wild animals cruelly tore apart Christians who refused to give up their faith in Jesus Christ. These victims included old as well as young, men and women, girls and boys. These were the early martyrs whose blood, as the saying goes, became the seed of the church.

In today's Gospel from St. John, we hear about the One whose blood inspired those first martyrs. Jesus of Nazareth stands accused before Pilate, the Roman governor of ancient Palestine. Jesus is charged with being a King in a world where anyone who dared to be a rival of the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, was a complete fool and also as good as dead. The charge against Jesus frightens Pilate beyond belief. Even so, Pilate tried to release his prisoner because he knew he was innocent. But Pilate was weak and did not want to run the risk of angering Rome. So he let the Jewish Religious leaders manipulate him into eventually crucifying the man we call the Christ. In today's Gospel passage, Jesus and Pilate spar over the charge that Jesus claims to be king. They talk past each other because Pilate cannot understand what Jesus is saying about his kingdom not being of this world. In the end, Jesus proclaims that he commands the allegiance not of armies or even of citizens but rather of those people who believe in the truth – and he says further that he came into the world precisely to testify to the truth.

Jesus' statement about Truth piques Pilate's interest and he says (in the next line of the Gospel, not included in today's passage): "What is Truth?" Unfortunately Pilate does not stick around for an answer. Rather he has Jesus scourged and, when this does not satisfy the blood-thirsty crowd, he orders his crucifixion.

But we, by God's grace, know what the Truth is. Sometimes we deny it and sometimes we pervert it. But deep-down we know it because we are Christians and our allegiance, as Jesus proclaimed before Pilate, is to the King of the Truth who is the only true king of our hearts. No power can lay claim to us the way Christ does. He is the only one in whom we have true freedom and real justice and lasting peace. Pope Pius XI instituted this Feast of Christ the King in 1925 amid the gathering storm of totalitarianism in Europe. Mussolini already dominated Italy and Hitler was soon to terrorize Germany and the world. Pius XI understood the truth that Jesus Christ is the only king who does not subjugate others but rather subjugates himself as servant to all and, by his subjugation to God's will, becomes the Savior of the world. Thus the truth is that we bend our knee to Christ not because of any earthly power that he wields over us but because the power of his grace has made him irresistible to us. When we bow before him, we are the most free of people. And when we subject ourselves in service to our neighbor, we nobly follow his paradoxically royal example. No nation or political party or ideology or philosophy or culture

can claim our complete allegiance the way Christ can because none of them has all the truth the way he does. Even the church in her human weakness cannot have ultimate power over us. The church has in history and sometimes still today puts itself in God's place through the arrogance of its ministers whose lack of humility is a betrayal of Christ as serious as those who betrayed him to Pilate. Ultimately, we belong to God alone and to Christ the King. When the church remembers this in meekness, then we believers can see clearly that the church mirrors the Lord and is, indeed, his true spouse to whom we also belong as sons and daughters. [Today we welcome into this holy church the catechumens and candidates who will soon be completely one with us and with Christ.] As brothers and sisters of this Christ, we participate in his royal, priestly and prophetic vocation through our common Baptism. We have a dignity like Christ the King and we offer our lives to the Father as he did in priestly sacrifice and in prophetic witness to the world. [What a wonderful calling you Catechumens and Candidates now share with all of us!]

Pilate represented a totalitarian regime, one of the most ruthless in history. Since his time, many empires have come and gone – but Christ and his Church remain. The totalitarianism of the twentieth century also passed into the dustbin of history, but not before doing unspeakable damage to humanity – especially in the Holocaust of the Jewish people (God's people.) Hitler and Mussolini and Stalin and Franco and too many others were and are above all liars who tried to make people afraid to stand up for the truth. But like Christ before Pilate, there were a few who had the courage to speak the truth. In all of Germany, there were only a few Christian people who dared to carry on the tradition of what Pope Benedict XVI calls in his recent encyclical "Charity in Truth." I am thinking of two priests, nearly the only two Catholic priests in all of Nazi Germany, who preached against the abomination of the Holocaust. These priests were Fr. Bernhard Lichtenberg (1875-1943) and Fr. Karl Leisner (1915-1945). Both ended up martyrs in the concentration camps. Pope John Paul II beatified them in 1996 in Berlin – ironically in the same Olympic Stadium where in 1936 Hitler staged his racist games and where Jesse Owens of Ohio State spoiled the dictator's Aryan party. These two priests symbolize all the men and women in history who have given their lives for the Truth – from Socrates in Athens to the students in Tiananmen Square. Whether explicitly Christian or not, they all have given witness to Christ the King of Truth.

When I was touring the Coliseum, I lamented for a brief moment the fact that in the Middle Ages, the Christian authorities removed the marble façade of that historic structure. It would look so majestic if the facade were still in place. But then I remembered that this marble was used in the churches of Rome. What a fitting transfer – from the symbol of raw and bloody power to the houses of worship where we sing the praises of our sweet and gentle Christ the King!