

CHRIST THE KING YEAR C 2010 HOMILY

(2 Samuel 5: 1-3; Colossians 1: 12-20; Luke 23: 35-43)

JESUS, THE KING OF LOSERS

We recently celebrated a big funeral in our church for a very good Catholic man. For the closing song, we sang a beautiful repetitive chant that originated in the ecumenical Catholic-Protestant monastery in France called Taize. The song goes like this: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom; Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Jesus, remember me ... “(Sing it), etc. – over and over.

Of course, this chant is inspired by today’s Gospel story of the Good Thief. This man opened himself to Jesus as they both hung on their crosses. The criminal invited Jesus to be the king of his heart. Many present, including the other thief, jeered at Jesus and mocked him for being “the king of the Jews” – as the inscription on the cross over Christ’s head proclaimed him to be. But the Good Thief accepted the grace that Jesus offers to all of humanity at every moment – the grace of redemption.

Today is the Solemnity of Christ the King, the last Sunday of the Church year. Next Sunday we begin Advent. This is a strange feast because Jesus never claimed to be a king and yet we acclaim him as the supreme ruler of our lives. Pope Pius XI ((1922-1939) instituted this feast in 1925 to counteract modern secularism and totalitarianism in a world where communism had taken hold in Russia, Mussolini had become Il Duce in Italy and Hitler was soon to rule in Nazi Germany. The idea of this feast was that no ruler or anyone else, no matter how powerful, has a claim on our hearts; only Jesus the Christ is our king – and the king of all people and of all time and of the whole universe. This kingship that the church proclaims on behalf of Jesus is true, even though he himself never claimed it. He spoke of the kingdom of God among us and he was certainly the Herald of this heavenly kingdom, but he was far too humble to call himself a king.

This strange feast also has a strange gospel in this year C of the three-year liturgical cycle – the gospel from Luke about the crucifixion. Although bystanders joked about Jesus being a king, it was just that to them – a big joke. In reality, Jesus was a loser to almost everyone: the leaders of the Jews who handed him over, the Romans who executed him, the crowds who made sport of him, and even his closest followers who deserted him. But there were a few exceptional folks who stood by him. These were his mother and a few other holy women and St. John the Apostle. And the Johnny come lately of the story is the Good Thief who won paradise by simply asking Jesus to remember him. This man was himself a big loser. But he had the blessing to turn to Jesus whom the thief somehow by amazing grace recognized as his savior and, yes, his king.

Jesus became a king precisely because he was a loser in most peoples’ eyes. And he was viewed as a loser precisely because he never compromised his goodness and he always did the will of the Father in all things. Jesus became a victor precisely because he was a victim, as St. Augustine wrote. The Father raised his Son from the dead precisely because Christ humbled himself to die the ignominious death of the cross to save us – to save us, losers, that is.

We live in a culture where victory is mistakenly connected to winning and having power over others. Tragically this is one of the main features of America: win at all cost and never, ever appear to be a loser. This is the exact opposite of the witness of Jesus who claimed no power over others – except the power that people like the Good Thief willingly gave him. It is my conviction that Catholics are called to be losers like Christ. Our royal dignity which we receive at Baptism is not a triumphal dignity such as the Jewish and Roman rulers who mocked the Son of God claimed as a possession and that evil men and women have insolently claimed throughout history as they climb to the top of the mountain of competition. No, our true dignity comes from recognizing that we are losers like the Good Thief who need God’s mercy and the salvation that comes only from his Christ. I am not speaking about being weak and cowardly and I, as a good Catholic, am all for doing our best at work or school or play. Rather, I am talking about the humility that marks the true Christian – the humility that puts others first and our own selfishness last. This humility will make us stand out, but not as winners in the American sense. This humility is what it means to be a loser like Jesus – and, paradoxically, this is what it means to be a king like Jesus too.

The English word “paradise” comes from a Persian word that means a walled garden. When a Persian king wanted to give one of his subjects a special honor, he invited him to walk in the royal garden. When Jesus promises the Good Thief “paradise,” he was guaranteeing that this criminal would be his companion in the garden of heaven. For the Good Thief, it was never too late to turn toward Christ. For us too, it is never too late to admit that we are losers who need to repent and accept Christ, our fellow loser, as king. As we get older, there are many things we can no longer do because of physical or other limitations. But there is one thing we can do until the very last moment of life – and that is to accept Christ’s invitation to be a real Christian. As the English historian and poet, William Camden (1551-1623), wrote about the man who was killed when he was thrown from his galloping horse: “Betwixt the stirrup and the ground,/ Mercy I asked, mercy I found.”

It is never too late to ask, as the Good Thief did: “Jesus, remember me!” It is literally true that while there is life, there is hope – hope in Christ the king of losers and thus the king of the universe!