

## Homily for Christ the King (A) 2008

In December 1925 Pope Pius XI published an encyclical letter (*Quas Primas*) in which he added the celebration of the Feast of Christ the King to the Calendar. Of course, there was nothing new about the idea that Christ is a King - the Kingdom of God is the central theme of the preaching of Jesus, and when challenged by Pilate Jesus tells him "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn 18.36), but Pius hoped that by introducing an annual feast of Christ the King, the idea of the kingship of Christ would be diffused into the whole Catholic way of thinking. Occasionally people feel rather uncomfortable with this feast on the grounds that it smacks of Catholic triumphalism, a Church too much tied up with the trappings of secular power, but this was certainly not what the Pope had in mind. Although he had spent the war years as Librarian at the Vatican, he had then seen the continuing turmoil in Europe at first hand when he was in Warsaw as Nuncio when the Russians invaded. He became Pope in 1922, and he chose as his motto "Christ's Peace in Christ's Kingdom". This motto gives us the clue to the meaning of today's feast. Pope Pius was very anxious to promote, and protect, peace. He introduced this feast as a reminder to secular rulers that they never ruled in their own right, but as representatives of Christ. People owe their rulers obedience by virtue of the fact that those leaders rule in place of Christ:

*"If princes and magistrates duly elected are filled with the persuasion that they rule, not by their own right, but by the mandate and in the place of the Divine King, they will exercise their authority piously and wisely, and they will make laws and administer them, having in view the common good and also the human dignity of their subjects. The result will be a stable peace and tranquillity, for there will be no longer any cause of discontent."*

With hindsight we can see that this was perhaps over-optimistic; already the storm clouds were beginning to gather over Europe again. But the principle is sound. When people in positions of power forget that, however exalted their position, they remain always subjects, subjects of the Kingdom of God, they begin to imagine that they can do as they please. The Feast of Christ the King is intended to remind all people, however exalted their status, that they are subject to a higher law, and that they will

have to account for their stewardship to a higher authority. It has always been the temptation of secular rulers to believe that they are at the top of the tree, but the greater their apparent power, the greater is their responsibility to use it in accordance with the constitution of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love and peace. Nor does this apply just to Christian leaders, for these are principles of natural law, they are part of the design of the human being and human society. So this feast is intended to permeate the Catholic world with the idea that earthly rulers are not just responsible downwards, to those who elect them, but also upwards, to the one eternal King. It is a little like the whispering voice of the slave who stood behind the victorious Roman generals in their triumphant processions, whispering over the cheers of the crowd 'remember, you are mortal'.

All of this should be salutary enough for any political leader, but the gospel reading of today's mass is even more disturbing. This is the last teaching before his passion - St. Matthew's next words are 'Jesus had now finished all he wanted to say' (26.1), and these words are addressed to his disciples, to the leaders of the community he will leave behind. This passage makes it clear that they will be held to account for what they do. There will be judgement based on how they have fulfilled their role on earth. The greater the power a person has - whether spiritual power or political power, the greater is their ability to influence the lives of others, for good or ill, and so the more serious is the possibility of judgement. But judgement will be real for all of us, and if we pretend otherwise we are living in a fantasy world. In one sense this seems disturbing. We sometimes seem very keen to create a sort of partial Christianity that leaves out the scary bits, and judgement is one of the things we are rather uncomfortable with. This trend appears in unexpected places. There is a fashion nowadays, for example, to talk about a funeral as a celebration of someone's life. Of course, it is good that we make thanksgiving a part of funeral ceremonies (so long as we are thanking God, rather than the person who has died), but there is something far more important to be done. Every one of us can expect to be called to account for what we have done, and as we face up to the disappointments of our past what we really need is the prayerful solidarity of those who are left behind. When I am standing before the glory of God, deeply ashamed of my failures and my sins which will look so mean and tawdry in the light of his love, I would rather you were not all

standing around telling each other what a nice chap I was, I would like you to be praying for me to be made whole, healed and set free.

Judgement, you see, will of course be painful; being called on to face up to our real selves is bound to be that. But, as Pope Benedict XVI has said, judgement is above all a focus of hope. The injustice, and violence, and pain of this world is not the end. The balance will be redressed. Even those sins and failings which I thought had gone unnoticed will be brought to light, and while this is painful at the time it will be the only way in which I can be set free and made whole; and if I am not made whole, how on earth could I ever feel happy and at home in Heaven? How could I live there, knowing that my anger, or my laziness, or my carelessness, has gone unchallenged and unnoticed. Only once all of these things have been brought to light, examined, and destroyed can I hope to feel at home in Heaven. Here is what Pope Benedict wrote in *Spe Salvi*:

*"Some recent theologians are of the opinion that the fire which both burns and saves is Christ himself, the Judge and Saviour. The encounter with him is the decisive act of judgement. Before his gaze all falsehood melts away. This encounter with him, as it burns us, transforms and frees us, allowing us to become truly ourselves. All that we build during our lives can prove to be mere straw, pure bluster, and it collapses. Yet in the pain of this encounter, when the impurity and sickness of our lives become evident to us, there lies salvation. His gaze, the touch of his heart heals us through an undeniably painful transformation "as through fire". But it is a blessed pain, in which the holy power of his love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God." (n47)*

So this feast is a reminder to us all, whoever we may be, that however great our position in Church or State, we are all subjects of Christ the King. And we will all be called to account for what we have been, what we have done. This is a great challenge, but it is also a great mercy. Once we begin to see God's judgement as it really is, we see that it is indeed frightening, but it is also life-giving. And, of course, it will hold no surprises for us; at the time of our judgement, the things we will be called to account for, the things which will confront us, will only be those choices that we ourselves have freely made.