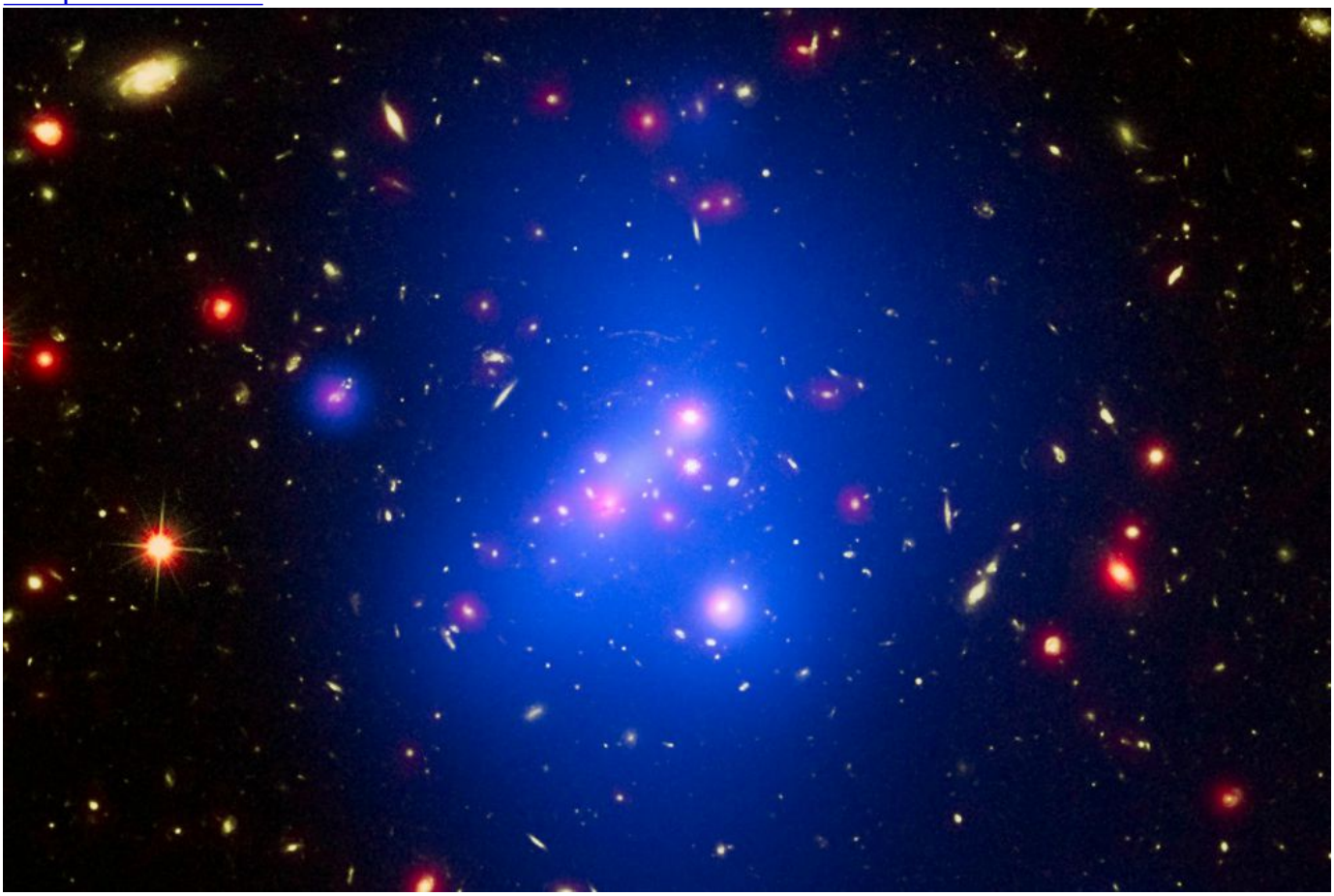
Spirituality
Scripture for Life



Multi-wavelength image shows galaxy cluster IDCS J1426.5+3508, in X-rays recorded by the Chandra X-ray Observatory in blue, visible light observed by the Hubble Space Telescope in green, and infrared light detected by the Spitzer Space Telescope in red. This rare galaxy cluster, which is located 10 billion light-years from Earth, is almost as massive as 500 trillion suns. (NASA/CXC/Univ of Missouri/M.Brodwin et al; NASA/STScI; JPL/CalTech)



by Sr. Mary M. McGlone

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What are we celebrating with today's feast? Some say that when Pope Pius XI established the feast of Christ the King in 1925, he wanted to combat secularism and also, some say, to remind the nations of Europe that even after losing its secular power, the Catholic Church remained more important than political realms. I once heard a preaching instructor say that this feast is the autumn version of Palm Sunday — a day when we sing "Hosanna to the Lord" whose message we tend to forget or forsake almost as soon as we leave the parade grounds. If we interpret the feast through the lens of the readings we hear today, we will understand it as a celebration of the God whose will is to draw us into sharing divine life.

The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

November 25, 2018

Daniel 7:13-14

Psalms 93

Revelations 1:5-8

John 18:33b-37

This year, we turn to John's Gospel to lead us in our consideration of Christ the King. Here, we have the famous trial scene in which Pilate questions Jesus only to find that he himself is on trial about the meaning of his life.

Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus didn't answer, at least not directly. Instead, Jesus interrogated Pilate about what he had at stake in the question. Today's celebration asks us as well what we have at stake in celebrating the feast the church calls "The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe."

Spanish theologian Juan Mateos points out that Pilate's naming of Jesus as "King of the Jews" was very different from the Palm Sunday crowd's calling to him "King of Israel." "King of the Jews" refers to the king of an ethnic group, a people bonded by political and blood ties. "King of Israel" places him in relation to the people God has gathered, recognizing him as the anointed leader of a people brought together by God's covenant offer.



(Mark Bartholomew)

When questioned by Pilate, Jesus didn't claim either title. Much to Pilate's confusion, Jesus admitted to being a king, but not in a realm that Pilate could comprehend. Pilate lived in a world of competition, fear and force. He would fear a king who could overthrow him like he feared the crowds who cowed him into doing their will. Pilate understood a world in which people must make their own importance known and felt, no matter how empty their claims to greatness. Pilate's is a world in which heredity, clothing, titles and the power to manipulate define a person's worth.

In contrast, Jesus had no need to cling to status. He knew why he was born and sent into the world. He claims that his only purpose in life was to testify to the truth.

Could anyone in history be freer than the man who says that? If being a king means that nothing and no one can constrain you, then Jesus is the King of Kings because he knows what he is about and no one can take that away.

Pilate had thought that he was dealing with a religious fanatic, or perhaps as others alleged, a revolutionary. But Pilate discovered that in Jesus he was facing the most powerful person he had ever met. Nothing Pilate could say or do, no bribe, no reward and no punishment could sway this man. Worse yet, he obviously had the power to influence others to imitate him.

Ultimately, that is the point of this feast. Those who choose Christ as their king buy into his preaching about the reign of God. As king, Jesus defined his realm as one in which the greatest is the one who serves the most. In his realm, the strongest have no need of coercion because those who seek the truth about life will fall in love with him and stake their lives on the freedom he offers, being willing to forsake everything else for it.

The people who choose to belong to the realm of Christ the King know their primary identity comes from the God who loves us all. Their citizenship papers are the baptismal certificates that entrust them with the mission to live by and spread the values of God's realm. Because they see Christ as king of the universe, they assume care for all of creation as an integral part of their mission.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis gives us the 21st-century version of the religious vision Pius XI was aiming at in establishing this feast. Francis calls us to be ready to put our life on the line, even to accepting martyrdom, in bearing witness to Jesus Christ, all for the purpose of bringing others to liberation. This is the means to sharing divine life and the goal of all who wish to live in God's realm with Christ as their king.

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Editor's note: *A full version of this Sunday Scripture commentary appears in NCR's sister publication Celebration, a comprehensive pastoral resource. Sign up to receive weekly Scripture for Life emails.*

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