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We have only one, very short, document written about Jesus during his own lifetime: the inscription explaining the reason for his execution. Luke quotes it as saying: "This is the King of the Jews." Short as it is, it has the power to indict everyone who contemplates it. The accusation, which John tells us caused controversy as soon as Pilate wrote it, explains the government's reason for executing Jesus. He was subversive. He refused to worship at the altars of imperial power where people are coerced to accept that might makes right. Jesus was charged with atheism, with sedition regarding the gods and rulers of his day. The alternative he offered was the God who wielded the power of merciful love as the only option to a world of violence, division and death.

The religious leaders near the cross inadvertently revealed their core creed saying, "If he's God's chosen one, he should save himself." Their theology was clear: "God helps us to help ourselves." They were heirs to the same faith tradition as Jesus but rejected the lens through which he read it. The soldiers, not much given to original thought, summarized the civil and religious positions with their jeering judgment that anybody who was aligned with the powerful should be able to muster self-serving force. All of these actors were putting Jesus' theology on trial. Would Jesus' God save him or prove impotent when confronted with the powers of palace and

temple?

In Jesus' last moments on earth, Luke allowed two criminals to focus the question of the ultimate meaning of his life. The first agreed with the forces that had seemingly brought Jesus to this moment. "Are you not the Christ?" "If you are, then work the miracle! Dazzle and compel them to believe in you! — And, by the way, bring us along on the getaway." With his final breath this man spoke for all who believe in the definitive power of domination and ultimate value of self-preservation.

The other criminal became the gospel's final and perhaps most unanticipated model disciple. Like the humble tax collector of Jesus' parable on prayer, his focus was on God and the blameless man who shared his fate. Unlike anyone else in the scene, he perceived God's presence in the innocent victim by his side. This criminal alone grasped the mystery that the King of the Universe was powerful enough to lay down his life, trusting only in God. Understanding this he could turn to Jesus and pray, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." He was perhaps the only person present at that moment who desired a place in Jesus' kingdom, and thus he was a comfort to Jesus even as Jesus promised him salvation.

Today's feast invites us to contemplate the crucifix as we hear the proclamation, "He is the image of the invisible God." This image of Christ the King puts all our ideas about God on trial. This image of Christ the King demands a response from us. We either ask to be a part of his reign or we choose to try to save ourselves.

We see here the God who comes to save, no matter the cost. We see here the God who knows nothing of coercion except its impotence when confronted by love. Luke invites us to look at the Christ and call him our King. Aware of what it costs, we are invited to repeat our Easter proclamation, "This is the faith we are proud to profess." As we meditate on what it means to call this Christ our King we understand the insight of the criminal who didn't ask Jesus to work any more of a miracle than to love him beyond death. He understood that Jesus needed no saving. He realized that Jesus wasn't seeking an escape because the cross revealed who he was as the Word made flesh, in solidarity with humanity and trusting the Father. This criminal, one of the most wretched of humankind, understood that God was by his side. He prayed, "Remember me." And as Jesus replied, "This day..." he declared that man "fit to share the inheritance of the saints in light" (Colossians 1:12).

The Feast of Christ the King of the Universe is a triumphant celebration of God's reconciling love, of divine solidarity with humanity, of God's love for us at our neediest. The image of Christ the King on the cross proclaims God's presence with us in our most wretched moments, offering us a love and salvation we could not deserve at our best. This is the feast of the indomitable power of love.

What better start to our week of Thanksgiving? Let the lowly hear and rejoice!

## **2 SAMUEL 5:1-3**

This selection from 2 Samuel might be understood as the folk story surrounding David's coronation. It subtly hearkens back to his humble origins as a shepherd and recalls that his wondrous victories are so well known that their details need no reiteration. This short narration purports to tell listeners everything they need to know about why David was chosen to be king of Israel.

First of all David was one of their own, their flesh and bone. No foreign king, no supposedly divine emperor, he knew them as they knew him. They could trust him to care about them, to understand their deepest longings as a people, and they knew he shared their hopes for the future. When he led them into battle, he was careful to see that they returned. They were comfortable with him as their choice.

But he was not their choice alone. Key to his position, more important than the people's preference, was that God had chosen him. God had called him to be shepherd and commander. That was made clear when God ordered the prophet Samuel to get over being impressed with appearances and power and to rely on how God sees into people (1 Samuel 16:1-13).

Last of all, the religious elders affirmed the kingly role that the people acclaimed and the prophet proclaimed. It was as if everything pointed to this one man: the people's intuition, confirmed by discernment and finally formalized by the affirmation of the elders, the religious leaders. With that backing David entered into a covenant, promising to be the leader God would empower him to be for the good of his people.

This reading may teach as much by what it subtly omits as by what it says of David. As the people acclaimed him king, they remembered him as the shepherd, not the giant-slayer. They spoke of him as the one who led them to safety, not the warrior who had slain his ten thousands or the skillful manipulator who outfoxed Saul (1

Samuel 18:7). This short reading offers insight into the best of Israel's tradition and hopes for leadership. David, the shepherd king, would be the ancestor of Christ, the Savior-King of the Universe.

When we celebrate Christ as King, the very title refers back to David. Everything about Jesus fulfilled what David symbolized. Jesus was flesh of their flesh and cared for his own. He took on the role of shepherd for the lost, caring especially for the lowly. He was chosen by God and established a new covenant. Son of David and Son of God, he offered all that could be asked of a King of the Jews.

## **COLOSSIANS 1:12-20**

As we approach today's selection from Colossians we are aware that scholars are divided about whether or not Paul is the author, but for the sake of convenience we can refer to the author as Paul. More important is the motive for the letter, which was to reinforce the community's appreciation of the primacy of Christ as the only source of salvation. Today's selection is an introduction situating the community in the divine plan of salvation followed by a hymn extolling Christ as the savior of the universe.

Paul begins this section calling the community to give thanks to God. For what? For freeing them from the power of darkness. In this selection Paul's concept of forgiveness of sin is liberation, being freed and empowered, made fit to live in the Kingdom of the Son. When he speaks of forgiveness, Paul is not concentrating on pardoning the transgressions of individuals but of freeing the community from the enslaving power of evil. In this, redemption, the forgiveness of sins, is not a juridical concept but an existential one. Those who have been delivered from darkness can perceive and choose true freedom.

What might escape our notice in this teaching is that Paul is speaking to the community *as community*, not as individuals. Every pronoun in the opening paragraph is plural. The freedom of which Paul speaks is a freedom known in and through community, specifically, the community of which Christ is the head. It is through the love of this community that the members learn how to live the reality of the Kingdom of the beloved Son. Sharing in the inheritance of the Son is a communal reality.

Finally, Paul used the hymn to extol Christ as the firstborn, the creator, the unifier, preeminent in everything. And yet, with all those superlatives, he is still the crucified one, the Son of God who suffered. As Paul will say elsewhere, because of that he is first. The Son who suffered in solidarity with humanity is *the one* who reveals God as the great lover of humankind.

### **LUKE 23: 35-43**

There is no other part of the gospels as visually suggestive and dramatically presented as the events of Jesus' passion. Certainly, the authorities who staged it had no idea that the scene would be remembered for thousands of years. Yet Luke, like his fellow evangelists, narrated the story for the very purpose of passing it on to posterity. One of Luke's special touches is that here, as throughout his entire Gospel, he emphasizes the lowly and the outsider. Already in the Passion Narrative we have seen Simon the African conscripted into carrying the cross and the wailing women who lined Jesus' path to Golgotha. Then, following Mark and Matthew, Luke reports the sneering and jeering of leaders and soldiers. At the moment of Jesus' death, Luke's rendition comes closer to John's than to Matthew and Mark's. Depicting Jesus' willful participation in the drama, Luke records his last words as the trust-filled prayer, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Luke's unique contribution to the passion story comes through the two men crucified with Jesus. Luke weaves this, the third incident of taunting the crucified Jesus, into a final dramatization of the offer of salvation. As the last public response to Jesus during his lifetime, this incident sets up the stark option of acceptance or rejection of the type of kingdom Jesus made present through his life. Jesus is depicted in the weakest, most scandalous depths of his incarnation, dying as an innocent, impotent victim of evil. It is impossible to portray a more profound solidarity with the human condition.

The two criminals of the story symbolize the human plight, they represent every sinner in the world. There's hardly a figure in history more appallingly helpless than a criminal on a cross. That someone in those circumstances could still play the part of an insolent bully staggers the imagination and yet, one of those co-crucified with Jesus used his dying breath to mock the blameless one who shared his fate. He was determined to die as he lived. This convict maintained unshaken his belief in violence, persistently and deliberately remaining a stranger to the humility of

vulnerability.

The other criminal, in the defeat of his dying day, indicted himself and admitted his guilt, his mistakenness about life. Unlikely to have had any theological formation to guide him, he was still able to perceive the goodness of the man being crushed beside him. Something about Jesus, perhaps his willingness to forgive the ignorance of his persecutors, was revelatory enough to make all the difference. This criminal, alone among all the people attending the event, looked at Jesus with faith. His focus was not on himself, but on the one who was there for him.

The one we call the “good thief” understood God as the one who comes to save. The world had no more need for judgment: The guilty and the innocent had both been condemned. Absurdity and injustice seemed to reign. The only thing that could give meaning to that moment was God’s love and solidarity with the needy. In capturing that, the thief understood all he would ever need to know of Jesus. He asked to be remembered when Jesus would finally become victorious, and Jesus replied, “*Today, you will be with me in Paradise.*”

The church has given us a harsh and beautiful icon to contemplate on this Feast of Christ our King. When we plumb its meaning, it reveals that nothing overpowers the love of God. It shows the God who is with every suffering creature offering compassionate, everlasting love, the only salvation that makes a real difference. This feast invites us to meditate on Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain. In the first beatitude we hear, “Blessed are you poor, yours is the Kingdom of God.” Only when we appreciate that, will we be ready to celebrate this feast.

## **Planning: Christ the King**

**By:** Lawrence Mick

As a feast of the universal church, Christ the King is less than a century old. It was instituted by Pope Pius XI in what can only really be described as a political move. It was a time when the pope was called “the prisoner of the Vatican;” he was not free to travel since there was no political rapprochement with the Italian government after the unification of Italy and the seizure of the Papal States.

It was also a time of growing nationalism and secularism in Europe, and the pope was insisting that the church had a right to freedom and immunity from the state, that leaders of nations must give respect to Christ, and so that the faithful must let Christ reign in their lives.

Pope Pius XI placed the feast on the last Sunday of October, but after Vatican II, Pope Paul VI moved it to the last Sunday of the liturgical year, which changed its focus somewhat. In this position, it takes on a definite eschatological tone, framed between the late Sundays of Ordinary Time and the First Sunday of Advent, all of which have readings focusing our attention on the end times.

Taken together, the second reading and the gospel today suggest the cosmic sweep of Christ's reign. St. Paul speaks of Christ as the firstborn of creation, in whom "were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible." In the gospel, Jesus promises the repentant thief that he will be with Christ in paradise. So Christ spans the whole of time, from the beginning of creation until the end of time.

This is a much broader view of this feast and this title of Christ. He is not just king over other lesser kings and presidents; he is king of the universe, which is the title that Pope Paul VI gave to the relocated feast. Preachers and planners might keep this perspective in mind in preparing the homily and the prayers for today. Among other things, it could prompt some attention to God's plan for the whole of creation and our responsibility to cooperate with that plan, especially in light of the critical threats to our planet today.

Readings for Christ the King are found in the lectionary at the Thirty-Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time, where one would expect them. The prayer texts in the Missal, however, are placed after those for Trinity, the Body and Blood of Christ and the Sacred Heart.

## **Prayers: Christ the King**

**By:** Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

In today's gospel, the Kingdom and Kingship of Jesus are set in the countercultural context of the cross. As startling as this is, it may be a good shot of realism for those of us who struggle through life. The King we celebrate today bears little semblance to our royal stereotypes. He knew almost no glory in his life, and his Kingdom was hard earned through suffering and death. This is the kind of king we can approach with confidence, for he knows our pain and our need for forgiveness.

## **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you were assigned the title of King of the Jews in sarcasm: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you forgave the repentant criminal condemned with you: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you are a King for all ages and all people: Lord, have mercy.

## **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** We pray with Christ, the suffering King, for the suffering people of the world.

**Minister** For the church: that it may be a viable witness to Christ as the suffering King ..we pray,

- For those who suffer to bring about God's reign on earth: for martyrs, prophets and advocates for peace and justice...we pray,
- For those across the world who do not yet know peace or justice, especially refugees...we pray,
- For a smooth political transition that ensures national unity and the ability to work together for the common good...we pray,
- During this Thanksgiving Week, we ask for grateful hearts to share our abundance with those in need...we pray,
- For those who provide the food we enjoy during this holiday, especially for farmers and those who work in the food industry...we pray,
- For the poor and hungry among us; for the sick and dying; and for those who have died...(names)...we pray,

**Presider** God of the powerless: You gave us your son to usher in a new reign of peace and justice. Jesus has shown us that this Kingdom is inhabited by those whose only power is love. We pray for the courage to live in and strengthen this Kingdom, meant for all. In his holy and powerful name, we pray. Amen.

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