

Solemnity of Christ the King
November 24, 2013
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Luke 23:35-43

In the days of King David, about whom we read in our Old Testament lesson, kings were chosen from amongst those who were military leaders, those who had personally sacrificed much and taken great risks to protect their people from threats both foreign and domestic. David certainly fit this profile, both with his defeat of Goliath, the Philistine giant, and with his expansion by conquest of the borders of Israel. But we have in our own nation's past chosen soldiers to be our presidents, Dwight Eisenhower, George Washington, and Ulysses S. Grant being the most prominent examples. Military men were thought to be able leaders because of all they had given in defense of their country. The people ruled by such kings could be confident that such sacrifices would continue.

In the modern era this ideal seems to have been lost. In the last twenty years or so we have chosen in each presidential election the man who did not fight over the man who did. In England the situation is even worse. The heir to the throne is intentionally kept out of combat and has been for more than a century, while the younger brothers are thrown into the fray. Thus, both Prince Andrew and Prince Harry have seen combat precisely because they likely will never be king, while Prince Charles and Prince William have not seen combat because they likely will be king. In a bizarre inversion of the principle of sacrifice, those who make sacrifices for their nation are not rewarded and those who stay behind the front lines receive the prize.

Our Gospel illustrates the lengths to which the King should go in order to protect His people. That is, Christ the King offers His life upon the cross in order to save sinners, a point amplified by the redemption in our Gospel today of the thief who was crucified with Jesus. So Jesus makes the sacrifice that kings of old made, demonstrating His bravery in the assaults of the enemy, even as He compassionately encourages His people of His love for them. But at the same time, Jesus' kingship is not like that which the world expects or even what His subjects might expect. Today I'm going to talk about three ways Jesus' kingship is different and how all the world benefits as a result.

First, in giving His life, Jesus is not rewarded with privilege, nor does He expect it. Remember that the first earthly sacrifice Jesus made was simply in His becoming man. From His throne in heaven Jesus lowered Himself to associate with the lowly, that is, those of us who are human. Whereas kings of the earth spend their days residing in palaces and adorn themselves with fine clothing, associating mostly with fellow nobles, Jesus was not the beneficiary of wealth and privilege. Indeed, He set aside more than we are able to imagine in order to bring us back with him to where He was.

His ignominious death drives the point home. While His detractors taunt Him, trying to entice Him to come down off the cross in order to demonstrate His kingly power, Jesus shows that true kingship consists in staying on the cross, completing the sacrifice, for the benefit even of those who nailed Him to the tree. His humility is unbounded.

Second, Jesus comes as a King proposing the truth for our embrace, not as one imposing His will upon the peoples of the earth. To the scoffers who want Him to come down off the cross and behave like an earthly king, Jesus remains silent. But to the penitent thief, who in his remorse recognizes the King of

the universe, to him Jesus promises paradise. Of his own accord, the repentant thief asks Jesus for help. Jesus doesn't drag him kicking and screaming into heaven, nor does He dispatch His persecutors to hell. He proposes the truth, and we either embrace or reject it.

Now Jesus has promised that He will come again in power, and then will be the time of imposition. But today is the time to allow His subjects the choice, whether they will follow Him or not. It is because of this example that I as a pastor do not chase people to get them into church; neither do I try to cajole them into becoming Catholic. I make the proposal, and if they show an interest I will answer all their questions, as best I can. But their decision to embrace the way, the truth, and the life must be free; so even the hint of coercion is unworthy of the Gospel, unworthy of the King who proposes, who does not yet impose.

What we ask of potential converts is precisely what Jesus asks of us, that we respond in kind to the love shown to us. So while I will not chase after or cajole people to get them into the Church, I will show them that I love them, again after the manner of Jesus, who fed the hungry, ate with sinners, healed the sick, and raised the dead in order that those who witnessed His good works know that God is love. Our proposal is that our neighbors love as they have been loved.

Third, Jesus' kingship differs from that of kings of the earth because of the tribute He expects. Even King David sought tribute from his own people, the case of Bathsheba and her husband Uriah the Hittite being the most egregious example. And in our own day subjects pay taxes to finance the lavish lifestyle of their rulers, whether they be monarchs or presidents.

Jesus, however, does not ask us for such offerings as a response to the sacrifices He made for us. Rather, he asks of us what the penitent thief offered as he hung upon the cross. He asks us to say, "I'm sorry." The tribute we offer for His death upon the cross is not money to make Him richer. Our first tribute to Christ our King is our remorse, which has the effect, when combined with Jesus' forgiveness, of enriching us beyond our wildest dreams. Jesus, then, is the king who enriches His subjects rather than expecting them to enrich Him.

In this way, when we offer other tribute, such as our treasure to adorn this beautiful house of worship, we give it not because he requires it, but because love requires it. Earthly kings impose taxes upon the money we ourselves have earned. Christ the King receives back in gratitude a portion of the bounty with which He has enriched His subjects. We give it willingly because we know that no amount of effort on our part could have gained what He gave us for free. So what begins with our required remorse ends with a voluntary and eternal thank you, an exchange no earthly king can come close to matching.