**THIRTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR C)**

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

2Sm 5:1-3; Ps 122; Col 1:12-20; Lk 23:35-43

*Let us go rejoicing to the house of the Lord*

**COMMENTARY**

*The Mission of the Crucified King*

At the end of the liturgical year, we joyfully celebrate the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe. It was introduced into the liturgy of the Church by Pope Pius XI in the holy year 1925 (with the Encyclical *Quas Primas* of 11 December), and later confirmed by Pope Paul VI in the new Roman Missal (approved by the apostolic constitution *Missale romanum* on 3 April 1969) and placed precisely on the last Sunday of the liturgical year. As Pope Pius XI pointed out in the aforementioned encyclical “That these blessings may be abundant and lasting in Christian society, it is necessary that the kingship of our Savior should be as widely as possible recognized and understood.” And the Preface to the Eucharistic Prayer of today’s solemnity is meant to accentuate especially the divine-spiritual character of Christ’s reign for humanity: “an eternal and universal kingdom; a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace.” This solemnity has gained even more importance since 2021, when Pope Francis wanted to move the celebration of World Youth Day from Palm Sunday to this day of Christ the King in all dioceses around the world.

In such a festive atmosphere, the gospel invites us to meditate again on some important particular features of Christ the King and his mission. Following these aspects will be essential for us, his disciples, who are called to continue the same mission of bringing the kingdom of God to all.

*1. The Crucified King Who Did Not Want To Save Himself*

With this short but dense passage from today’s gospel, the liturgy wishes to recall Jesus’ last moment on the cross. It thus sends us back to “Good Friday,” the end of his earthly life and at the same time the culmination of his mission.

The blasphemous mockery of the leaders of the Jews, the Roman soldiers, and even one of the evildoers, still highlights the humiliation and tragic nature of the moment. We have the impression of hearing from all sides the refrain with the terrible pounding rhythm: “Save! Save! Save yourself!”

However, from Jesus’ non-reaction in the face of provocation, there emerges precisely all the patience, meekness, “royal” determination of one who has only one thing on his mind, as He declared from the age of twelve, the age of an adult of the People of God according to Jewish tradition: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Lk 2:49). He also was the one who wanted, ardently and resolutely, to make the journey to Jerusalem, to fulfill “everything written by the prophets about the Son of Man” (Lk 18:31). Therefore, one could “hear” from Christ’s silence on the cross, as a response to that blasphemous refrain of the mockers, the song of unceasing praise, a sign of faith and total loyalty to God: “Holy, holy, holy the Lord God Almighty.”

Jesus’ mission is always to fulfill the Father’s plan for the salvation of all, including those who do not understand Him, mock Him, crucify Him, and even at the cost of the consummation of their own lives. Therein lies the greatness of the divine king, the Christ of God, the chosen one. This will also be the path of each of his disciples-missionaries, called to have, like Christ the King, the same patience, meekness and “royal” determination.

*2. The Merciful King Who Gives Paradise*

From the crucifixion scene, St. Luke gives us the exclusive close-up (unique among the gospels) of the conversation between Jesus and the “good thief.” Emerging here, again as in many of the episodes in Luke's gospel that we have heard on the Sundays of this liturgical year, is a Jesus full of mercy. He is the face of God, merciful toward the least, the excluded, the repentant, the needy. The mission of Christ the King is that of mercy. It is no accident that even before the episode of the good thief, Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of all his executioners: “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34), and that includes those who thought or boasted that they knew what they were doing!

His kingdom has always and forever been that “of life [...], love and peace,” to repeat again the words of the preface of today’s Mass, and it will always be greater than all human frailty. And the moving request of the repentant thief after sincerely acknowledging the consequence of his sin, then publicly defending Jesus’ innocence, becomes the model of prayer for all disciples, indeed, for all people in need of salvation at the moment of trial and death: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” It refers, in effect, to the invocation to divine mercy by members of God’s people: “Remember your compassion and your mercy, O LORD, for they are ages old” (Ps 25:6).

*3. The Eternal “Today” of Salvation Offered by Christ the King*

Faced with the touching plea of the thief in which the voice of every man and woman seeking salvation can be heard, Jesus’ response is not long in coming, and it too is both beautiful and dense with theological-spiritual meaning: “Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” As we see from the initial wording (“Amen, I say to you”), this is a deliberately solemn statement, as if He wanted to announce to all what He was saying only to one. Jesus promises, nay, assures the thief of salvation, that is, of being in heaven with Him, and this will be accomplished “today,” on that same “Good Friday”! (He did not say, “Wait, dear thief, three days, hanging on the cross, and when I rise again on the third day, then you will be with me!”).

This “today,” therefore, does not refer to material time, but concerns the eternal today of salvation offered by Christ the King crucified. It was already for Zacchaeus when he welcomed Jesus into his home, who declared: “Today salvation has come to this house […]. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost” (Lk 19:9-10). Even more, this “today” had already been proclaimed by God through his angels at the time of Jesus’ birth: “For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord” (Lk 2:11). It is then found again on the lips of Jesus Himself in the synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of his public activities: “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21). It is the “today” of Jesus’ mission to bring the divine gospel to all in need and to gather all God’s scattered children into the kingdom of peace and salvation.

Such “today” of God and Jesus continues even now, and all of Christ’s disciples are called to proclaim to all that “day” of the Lord, which ultimately will not be a nefarious day of condemnation and fire, but one of forgiveness and salvation. Regardless of how bad, how evil, how sinful the past that each person carries on his or her shoulders may be, it will be enough to turn to Jesus, the crucified King, sincerely calling on him, like the good thief. He waits for every man and woman always with patience, understanding and mercy. By giving the paradise to the “good thief”, Christ the King on the cross mystically continues to wait for the return of the other thief, the “bad” one, in order to give him, too, the “today” of his salvation in his kingdom.

It is therefore necessary to bring to everyone this great mystery, at opportune and inopportune times, that mystery of God’s love in Christ for every person in the world. Thus is expanded by attraction the sweet reign of Christ the crucified King, who also promised, prophesying: “And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself” (Jn12:32). May these sacred words therefore always be in our hearts and on our lips to share with all the truth of the eternal “today” of our salvation in Christ, Son of God and our Lord: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. (Jn 3:16-17).

*Useful points to consider*:

**Catechism of the Catholic Church**

**786** Finally, the People of God shares in the royal office of Christ. He exercises his kingship by drawing all men to himself through his death and Resurrection. Christ, King and Lord of the universe, made himself the servant of all, for he came “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” For the Christian, “to reign is to serve him,” particularly when serving “the poor and the suffering, in whom the Church recognizes the image of her poor and suffering founder.”The People of God fulfills its royal dignity by a life in keeping with its vocation to serve with Christ.

The sign of the cross makes kings of all those reborn in Christ and the anointing of the Holy Spirit consecrates them as priests, so that, apart from the particular service of our ministry, all spiritual and rational Christians are recognized as members of this royal race and sharers in Christ’s priestly office. What, indeed, is as royal for a soul as to govern the body in obedience to God? and what is as priestly as to dedicate a pure conscience to the Lord and to offer the spotless offerings of devotion on the altar of the heart?

**Benedict XVI**, *Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, The King of the Universe,* ***Angelus***, Saint Peter’s Square, Sunday, **22 November 2009**

But in what does this “power” of Jesus Christ the King consist? It is not the power of the kings or the great people of this world; it is the divine power to give eternal life, to liberate from evil, to defeat the dominion of death. It is the power of Love that can draw good from evil, that can melt a hardened heart, bring peace amid the harshest conflict and kindle hope in the thickest darkness. This Kingdom of Grace is never imposed and always respects our freedom. Christ came “to bear witness to the truth” (*Jn* 18: 37), as he declared to Pilate: whoever accepts his witness serves beneath his “banner”, according to the image dear to St Ignatius of Loyola. Every conscience, therefore, must make a choice. Who do I want to follow? God or the Evil One? The truth or falsehood? Choosing Christ does not guarantee success according to the world’s criteria but assures the peace and joy that he alone can give us. This is demonstrated, in every epoch, by the experience of numerous men and women who, in Christ’s name, in the name of truth and justice, were able to oppose the enticements of earthly powers with their different masks, to the point that they sealed their fidelity with martyrdom.

**Pope Francis, *General Audience*,** Saint Peter’s Square, Wednesday, **28 September 2016**

The words that Jesus pronounces during his Passion find their peak in forgiveness. Jesus forgives: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34). These are not only words, they become a concrete act of forgiveness offered to the “good thief” who was beside Him. Saint Luke writes of the *two criminals* who were crucified with Jesus, who turn to Him with contradictory attitudes.

*The first* criminal insults Him, […]

*The other is the one known as the “good thief”.* His words are a wonderful example of repentance, a catechesis centred on learning to ask Jesus for forgiveness. First, he turns to his companion: “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?” (Lk 23:40). In this way he highlights the starting point of repentance: the fear of God. Not the dread of God, no: the filial fear of God*.* [...]

Then the good thief declares Jesus’ innocence and openly confesses his own guilt: “And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong” (Lk 23:41).

Therefore, Jesus is there on the cross to be with those who are guilty: through this closeness, He offers them salvation. That which was a scandal to the leaders and the first thief, to those who were there and those who mocked Jesus, is, on the other hand, the foundation of the good thief’s faith. Thus he becomes a witness of Grace; the unthinkable happened: God loved me so much that he died on the Cross for me. This man’s very faith is a fruit of Christ’s grace: his eyes contemplate, on the Crucifix, the love God has for him, a poor sinner. It is true, he was a thief, he was a crook, he had stolen things throughout his life. But in the end, he regretted what he had done, and, seeing Jesus, so good and merciful, he managed to *steal* Heaven: he is a great thief, this man!

The good thief finally addresses Jesus directly, invoking his help: “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power” (Lk 23:42). He calls him by name, “Jesus”, with confidence, and thus confesses what that name means: “the Lord saves”: this is what the name “Jesus” means. That man asks Jesus to remember him. There is so much tenderness in this expression, so much humanity! It is the need of the human being not to be forsaken; that God may be always near. […]

While the good thief speaks of the future, saying: “when you *come in* your kingly power”, Jesus’ answer does not leave him waiting; he speaks of the present: he says “*today* you will be with me in Paradise” (v. 43). In the hour of the cross, the salvation of Christ reaches its *height*; and his promise to the good thief reveals the fulfillment of his mission: that is, to save sinners. [...]

On the Cross, his last act confirms the fulfillment of this plan of salvation. From beginning to end, He revealed Himself as Mercy, He revealed Himself as the definitive and unrepeatable Incarnation of the Father’s love. Jesus is truly the face of the Father’s mercy. And the good thief called him by name: “Jesus”. It is a short invocation, and we can all make it several times during the day: “Jesus”. Simply, “Jesus”. Let us do so throughout the day.