

Homily For the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe - Year A

St. Peter's Sat 5:00/ Sun 8:00 Masses - November 21/22, 2020

Ezek. 34:11-2,15-17 "I will rescue my sheep from all the places to which they have been scattered."

Psalms 23:1-6 "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."

1 Cor. 15:20-28 "For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ."

Matt. 25:31-46 "And these will go into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life."

The King Who Is A Shepherd

Introduction

It was such a nice sounding year - 2020. What could be better than that? Symmetry and perfect vision together. Now the end of it can't come soon enough. We did, however, get a lot of very funny cartoons and one liners out of this year. 2020 is a unique leap year. It had 29 days in February, 300 days in March, and five years in April.

In the life of Christian faith, though, we still count the years since the birth of Jesus Christ. The Church year, what we call the liturgical year, ends this week, with today's solemn feast called "Christ, the King of the Universe."

Today, there is Good News which has not been the least bit damaged or tarnished by what has happened in the world. It was never diminished by wars and plagues and unrest in the past, and it sure isn't lost because of this year's events either. WE may have lost it. That happens because of events in the world and in our personal lives, but the truth does not change. God does not change. In the middle of the chaos, God is still in charge, even moreso, and Jesus Christ is still the king.

Jesus began his public ministry with the proclamation that the kingdom of God is at hand. At the Last Supper, the conclusion of his earthly ministry, he declared: I will not drink the fruit of the vine again until that day I drink it new with you in my Father's Kingdom. Brothers and sisters in Christ, that kingdom is in the future, but it is also here with us now. Today, let us dig deeper into how this is so.

The Solemn Feast Of Christ the King

Christ the King Sunday celebrates the all-embracing authority of Christ as King and Lord of the cosmos. It celebrates His sovereignty over all men, women and children, and the full and final triumph of the One through whom the entire universe was created, and by whom it will be completely remade at the "end" of all time. Let us rejoice that this same Jesus who loves each one of us, is both the eternal high priest and Universal King.

In between the two world wars of the 20th Century, when the atheistic powers of communism and fascism were leading the world towards a non religious world view, Pope Pius XI introduced this feast to make the statement that, even if a country stops being Christian and devotion to Christ was being discouraged, the Pope wanted to make it clear that Christ is still our King, no matter what governments might have to say about it.

We have three cycles of bible readings. Next year, the readings for this feast are about the majesty of God, a glorious king and ruler. But this year's readings tell us about an unusual God, who is the Shepherd of his people.

By What Authority

I once knew a woman who had just become Catholic. She had this issue with using the terms 'Lord' and 'king' for God. She said to me, I don't use the word 'Lord' for God. I don't want to give someone power over me. It makes me feel vulnerable, like I'm not in control of my own life.

Who or what do we consider authoritative? Typically, we mistrust authority, even legitimate authority, for two reasons. One is that we want to protect ourselves from unjust authority. I used to work with a fellow who would tell anyone who would listen that we should not trust the latest directives from our bosses. When someone would say to him, you are just being paranoid, his answer was: Yes, and around here paranoia is just good common sense.

But we also mistrust authority out of pride. It is in our wounded or damaged human spiritual DNA to resent and reject power over us. In ancient Israel, it took

a long time for them to accept the authority of a king. Kings were supposed to reflect the authority of God, not their own authority.

Can we trust God? The God who takes on our flesh, Jesus Christ, says to his Father in the garden: Not my will be done, but yours. Then he goes out and gives his entire self, his body and blood, for love of humanity. That doesn't sound like most kings or presidents or prime ministers. But it does sound like an authority we can trust and follow.

Shepherds and Sheep

In the near East, a good king was often referred to as a shepherd, one who takes responsibility to care for and protect his flock. Today's readings tell us that our God is a shepherd king and, although we probably don't like the image of being called sheep, our king wants to do for us what a shepherd does for the sheep in his care.

The Old Testament is full of shepherds. All of the patriarchs were shepherds. But so were the girls. Jacob's wife, Rachel, took care of her father's sheep. It was an honourable and usual livelihood. Shepherds found pastures for the sheep to eat, and wells or pools for drink. They protected them against animals of prey and against bad weather. They went out looking for the strays and fixed their injuries. Above all, they kept perfect order, harmony and unity in the flock.

We were on the first stage of our walk through France to get to the main part of the Camino de Santiago in Spain. The land in south central France was just full of cows and sheep. We noticed some sheep coming around some trees ahead of us. It was a beautiful pastoral scene. Then all of a sudden, it was apparent that there must have been a thousand sheep, with half a dozen shepherds, all heading right down the path we were standing. Just at the moment when I wondered if we would be trampled to death, the sheep simply made a smooth path around both sides of us. It was perfect order and harmony, even though we couldn't move for ten minutes while they filed past.

The amazing 23rd psalm comes out of this tradition, recognizing the God who does all of those things for his people: "The Lord is my Shepherd." This was a song of trust in the Shepherd's care. "There is nothing I shall want." Black Friday is this coming week. It's a time when we will be encouraged to think about the many things that we want. The Christian message is that, no matter how much or how little we have or think we should have, God will give us the fullness of joy to fill our hearts.

Sometimes, finding new pastures meant passing through the deep valleys that could be dark and dangerous, with predators and frightening sudden storms. So the psalmist says: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me."

The world has a hard time understanding this compassionate shepherd King/God. Jesus Christ entered right into the middle of our need. He experienced the worst of everything we experience: rejection, physical pain and mental anguish. He stood between us and the ultimate dark valley, hell itself, and took the blows of hatred on himself. What an unusual king.

Then Who Can Be Saved

The ancient prophet, Ezekiel, describes the shepherd particularly as the one who gathers the scattered and the lost. Back then, it was those returning to Jerusalem after it had been destroyed and after they had spent many years in captivity. So, God was literally gathering the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

But Jesus came to gather on a much bigger scale. He came to gather all of God's children, in all of the nations of the world, who have wandered away from truth and goodness. That's where we come in. We are the lost because, on our own, we are way too attracted to self centred pride, and lust, and envy, and anger. If we can't see ourselves as lost, we won't be able to hear the shepherd's voice calling us together and asking us to care for each other.

In the shepherd:

In the New Testament, the shepherd image is used almost exclusively as a metaphor to describe the care of Jesus Christ for the lost sheep. David was a shepherd before he was king. Jesus was born in the city of David, Bethlehem, in a cave sheepfold. The first news of Jesus birth was to shepherds. Jesus declares his mission for the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He is the shepherd who leaves the 99 and goes looking for the one. He is the one who has joy at the single sinner who returns. Disciples scatter like sheep at his arrest. But he says after his resurrection to Peter: Feed my lambs, feed my sheep. That is still what Jesus does in the Church today.

Christ is a king who does not kill anyone. On the contrary, he dies for everyone. He does not spill the blood of anyone. He sheds his blood for all. He does not sacrifice anyone, he sacrifices himself for his servants whom he calls friends. The Redeemer is the one who gives life and freedom to his children, not the one who takes away life and freedom from his children.

In the poor:

Jesus made it pretty clear. There are two commandments. Love God. Love your neighbour. The Gospel passage today is a dramatic reminder that how we follow that second great commandment will determine whether we live forever with the shepherd king. We must learn to care for those whom Martin Luther King Jr referred to as: The least, the lost, the last and the lonely. Jesus became all those things on the cross. The cross was his throne for a time. His power is found in what looks like weakness. Now we are asked to join him in shepherding those who are least, lost, last and lonely.

The Church asks us to pause today, at the end of the year, and note that He is the king of the universe and to ask: Is he the king of your life? What parts of my life show that I believe that Christ is my King? What prayer and action will I take during Advent to prepare for the shepherd king to come again. Listen to his voice in the middle of the chaos. Follow him. Learn to trust him again.

Key Verses Today

Collect: *Almighty ever living God ... your beloved Son, the king of the universe, grant that we may proclaim your majesty and praise.*

Ezekiel: *Thus says the Lord: As a shepherd seeks out his flock, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered. I myself will be the shepherd ... seek the lost and bring back the strayed, bind up the injured and strengthen the weak. As for you, my flock, I shall judge between one sheep and another.*

Psalms: *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul ... Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me ... Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord.*

1 Corinthians: *Brothers and Sisters, Christ has been raised from the dead... for since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a man. For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ, the first fruits, then those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death ... so that God may be all in all.*

Matthew: *Jesus said to his disciples: When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats ... Then the king will say to those at his right hand: Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me. Then he will say to those at his left hand: You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels ... Then they will answer: Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you? Then he will answer them: Truly, I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me. And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life.*