

Christ the King - "Jesus' Place is Open to Everyone"

In St Peter's Square, in Rome, there stands an ancient Egyptian obelisk - a single block of marble almost 100 feet high, weighing 330 tons. The obelisk was originally erected around the year 1850 BC as a monument to the Pharaoh of Egypt.

At the time of Christ, after Rome had conquered Egypt, the Roman Emperor Caligula brought the obelisk to Rome as a sign of Rome's superiority to Egypt. Centuries later, when the barbarians invaded Rome and the city fell into disrepair, the obelisk fell. Ivy grew around it. It was half-buried near the old Basilica of St Peter.

In the 16th Century when St Peter's Basilica was rebuilt and expanded, Pope Sixtus V had the obelisk erected in the center of St Peter's plaza, where it still stands today. No longer is it a reminder of the long-perished empires of Egypt and Rome and the barbarians. Now it has been put at the service of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ and is topped with a bronze cross. Inside that bronze cross is mounted a small fragment of the true cross, the cross on which Christ was crucified - his throne.

The Cross of Jesus declares to the world that Jesus is the only king who has opened the doors of his palace to everyone. But not everyone will accept his invitation to come in, as today's Gospel makes very clear.

As Jesus hung on the cross, revealing God's saving love, the crowd sneered and jeered at Jesus. They knew that he had claimed to be the Messiah, the Savior, the King of Israel, but they could only imagine kingship in earthly terms. And so they challenged Jesus to show that he was truly a king by coming down from the cross. If Jesus could eliminate human suffering and injustice (symbolized by coming down from the cross), so they thought, he would prove himself to be a worthy king. But Jesus didn't do it. He didn't even respond to them with an explanation. He simply kept suffering unfairly until the very end. And as he suffered, the good thief realized the truth. He realized that there is more to the human story than what we see, experience, and understand here on earth. He realized that Jesus held the key to a Kingdom much greater than any the earth would ever know. He realized that Christ's Kingdom could begin on earth, through faith, hope, love and obedience, but that it would only reach its fullness hereafter, and so he makes his prayer:

"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

To that request, Jesus responded. As a true King, he granted the favor. He didn't take away the Good Thief's suffering - Christ's Kingdom is not of this world as we read in John's Gospel, but he gave it purpose: he made it a path to Paradise. And as the Good Thief hung on the cross, dying, tortured, in excruciating pain, he was trusting because he had placed himself under the King's protection, and the King would keep his promise.

There are inscriptions on the base of the obelisk, two of which I would like to show you images of. The part of the inscription facing out away from St Peter's, facing the rest of the world, reads:

***Ecce crux domini, fugite partes adversae, vincit leo de tribu judae,
Behold the cross of the Lord, let his enemies flee, the lion of the Tribe of Judah has
conquered!***

This reference to the Lion of the Tribe of Judah goes all the way back to the Book of Genesis. Judah was one of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, and back in the first book of the Bible Judah is referred to as the king of the beasts, a Lion. For it was from the Tribe of Judah that the true king of Israel, the Messiah would originate. In the last book of the Bible there is a return to the image of the Lion, in Revelation Chapter 5. But the image of the Lion gives away immediately to another image, that of a Lamb that had been slain. Both the Lion and Lamb are representations of Jesus. And they need to be held together. For you see, in this world the Reign of Christ is like that of a vulnerable and helpless Lamb, like Jesus on the Cross. But it will give away in Paradise to the glorious Lion victorious over death. The message of the base of the obelisk that faces the world declares that for the person who has the eyes to see, like the prayerful thief, Jesus will be recognized as the true king.

The part of the inscription facing the Basilica reads:

***CHRISTVS VINCIT / CHRISTVS REGNAT / CHRISTVS IMPERAT / CHRISTVS AB
OMNI MALO / PLEBEM SVAM /***

Christ conquers. Christ reigns. Christ commands. May Christ defend his people from all evil.

Now think about this inscription this way. When we turn our lives over to Jesus in the present life, he is beginning to rule in our hearts and starting to reign there as well. The Christian also has the trusting confidence to affirm that Christ will ultimately conquer and by his grace we will gain Paradise and be defended from all evil.

So what did Jesus mean when he promised Paradise? It is a word meaning “garden” or “park”, used three times in the New Testament. He indicates that the true garden of paradise is supernatural and heavenly, not natural and merely earthly. It is nothing less than the eternal dwelling of God, where Jesus promised to accompany the good thief after death (Lk 23:43) and where Paul was transported in a mystical journey (2 Cor 12:3). This heavenly paradise is the eternal dwelling that awaits the saints as we read in Revelation 2.7:

To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’¹

So while it is true that Jesus opens the doors of his palace to everyone, we need to have the eyes to see, the mind to conceive and the heart to receive the invitation to his palace. To do so doesn’t mean paradise on earth. We must not expect perfect happiness in this life. The cross is anchored to the earth, but it stretches up into heaven - just so, our happiness begins on this earth, when we discover the depth of God's love for us, but it will never be complete until, with God's grace, we reach heaven, Paradise. In this life we are called to work and to

¹ [The Holy Bible](#) (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, Re 2:7). (2006). Ignatius Press.

fight, resisting the tug of our selfish nature day after day. We are called to reach out to our neighbors who don't know Christ, who have no purpose in the midst of their sufferings, and introduce them to Jesus.

We are called to defend lovingly and courageously Christian values, even if society attacks us because of it. Above all, we must never limit our faith to our private lives. No, our faith must affect everything we do and all that we are. Because we are followers of Christ the King, we should be more dependable professionals, more self-sacrificing parents, more responsible workers, more active and joyful citizens. Christ is our King. He died to save us.

As long as history lasts, this King will have enemies, and if we truly love him, which we do, we will fight them, using the same weapons that he used: obedience to the Father's will, and self-forgetting love of neighbor. Such love will not convert all, but it will some, like the thief who called Jesus by name and longed for his kingdom.

Back in 2005 Benedict XVI was elected Pope, he greeted the crowd that was in St Peter's Square with the obelisk at the Square's centre. Cardinal Francis George was on one of the adjoining loggia with other Cardinals who had elected the Pope. When he returned to Chicago, where he was the Archbishop, he was asked by a reporter what his thoughts were on April 19, 2005. This was his answer:

“I was gazing over toward the Circus Maximus, toward the Palatine Hill where the Roman Emperors once resided and reigned and looked down upon the persecution of Christians, and I thought, ‘Where are their successors? Where is the successor of Caesar Augustus? Where is the successor of Marcus Aurelius? And finally, who cares? But if you want to see the successor of Peter, he is right next to me, smiling and waving at the crowds.’ ”

Jesus Christ is Lord. That means that neither Caesar nor any of his descendants is Lord. Jesus Christ, the God-man risen from the dead, and fought with the enemies of the human race—he is the one to whom final allegiance is due. Christians are those who submit to this Lordship, to His Kingship.²

And we are thankful that Jesus is the only king who has opened the doors of his palace to everyone

² Barron, Robert . Catholicism (p. 35). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.