

**The reading this morning is from Gospel of Luke Chapter 23
verses 33 through to verse 43 reading from the New Revised
Standard Version of the Bible.**

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!"

The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Thanks be to God

Today, the last Sunday of the Church Year is called "Christ the King Sunday".

For many the image of Jesus the Christ as King is perhaps troublesome. Although our democracy may be a constitutional monarchy there is a tension around the whole concept of kingship when it is applied to Christ Jesus.

It may help us then to appreciate what Christ the King Sunday is all about if we know a bit about how it came to be.

The title for this Sunday was created fairly recently - in 1925 by Pope Pius XI, and it entered into the Protestant Church during the nineteen-sixties as more and more Protestant churches began to use the Lectionary reading cycle schedule as a basis for the weekly Bible readings.

Why did Pope Pius XI create this Sunday and suggest the readings that we have just heard? Quite simply because the church needed the image of Christ the King at that very moment in time.

On its first celebration, Mussolini was the leader of Italy and Hitler and his Nazi party was growing in popularity, and the world lay in a great Depression: a depression that would become far worse over the next fifteen years.

In such a time, Pius XI asserted that, nevertheless, with all of those new dictators and false values in the world, Christ is King of the universe.

The feast of Christ the King, then, was - and is - basically a language thing, a symbol, a metaphor, designed to be a statement of life's fundamental question for broken and difficult times.

Although Christ the King Sunday seems to leapfrog the next three months over the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, and even Lent -- running right into the next Holy Week itself it actually doesn't. Rather it summarizes the entire year just completed. Wrapped up in today's Gospel is the infant king of last Christmas: "*Hark! The herald angels sing, 'Glory to the newborn king.'*" Our choir will be singing of that King during Advent with their cantata "The Promise of a King."

The mocking of the soldiers in today's Gospel (*"If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!"*) is an echo of the first Sunday in Lent, when the devil dared to goad Jesus, *"If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread"* (Luke 4:3). And again, *"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here ... "* (Luke 4:9).

Indeed, all of Jesus' parables, miracles, and sermons of the past twelve months are focused today on the throne of the cross. In other words today's Gospel is a summary of the twelve months we have just finished.

This then all comes to culmination in today's celebration of Christ the King. Here the final Sunday of the Church year—anticipates the crescendo of the universe when Jesus shall be crowned as we read in the Book of Revelation: "*Lord of lords and King of kings!*" (Rev 17:14).

Christ the King Sunday gives us an opportunity to reflect upon the powerful implications of King Jesus for today's world in our time. If in fact Jesus as the Son of God is our King then through Jesus Christ what is God saying about power, about who has power and to what end is that power to be used?

In Jesus, the one whom the rulers of this world nailed to a cross, we see an image of what God is saying and doing in the world. When we look at Jesus we see one who embodies a cosmic shift of power. It is a powerful message because it stands in stark contrast to the kings who rule and have ruled the world. Remember the words of Mary's magnificat which we will read in a few weeks:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ... He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

There is no doubt from what Mary sings; Jesus is going to bring about a major shift, a Holy shift in the balance of power. There is a great deal of irony and paradox surrounding this image of the kingship of Jesus.

With today's Gospel reading, we encounter one of the most central rhythms of Christian theology—the idea of reversal. One finds it in everything—the first shall be last, the last first; the rich shall be made poor, and the poor rich; to live one must first die; to be great is to serve. And in today's portrait, we have the ultimate reversal of reversals—the king fit for a palace "reigns" over a garbage heap called The Skull; the strong one in David's line cannot carry even a cross; his entourage are criminals on each side; his finest wine is vinegar; the court games are dice for his own garments; his "adoring" courtiers are scoffers and mockers; his throne is a cross, his crown is thorns, his coronation is his death, and just before darkness obliterates the carnage, we see a sign above his head: "This is the King of the Jews." (v.38)

To go up is to go down, to win is to lose, to become righteous is to confess one's unrighteousness, to die is to live. Perhaps nowhere as in this spectacle does the radicalness of the Gospel stand more exposed.

It is easy to slip into triumphalism as we celebrate Christ the King Sunday, glorifying Jesus as the king who reigns, while forgetting the reality of the cross. Today however we are reminded of what Paul referred to as the scandal of the cross. How can one who is nailed to a cross be a king? How can one who is mocked in his suffering with words "*If you are king of the Jews, save yourself.*" be a king?

What we have is a king who is like no other. He is a paradox, a contradiction of terms. He is Alpha and Omega. He is priest and sacrifice, king and servant, a servant king, a shepherd king. He came born of poor parents, in a cattle barn and was forced to flee to a foreign land and be a refugee. He associated with the outcasts and the down trodden of his day and then when he was about thirty-three years old he was put to death upon a cross. Does this sound like a king to you?

The apostle Paul and the people of Jesus' day knew full well that the world had been battered and torn by a wide variety of kings and emperors. That's why Paul reminds his readers that they have been transferred into a new kingdom ruled by Christ himself who is a real King. Paul reaches for every superlative he can find:

Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation in whom all things were created. Before all things, holding all things together, Christ is the beginning, the firstborn of the dead so that he might have first place in everything.

That's right, first place in everything and that includes our lives. Don't be fooled, Jesus demands all of us. He does not want to be sealed off into some area of our lives called "religious" or "church" safe and untouched to be brought out only on Sunday morning. Rather, Jesus wants to rule our lives in all aspects of our living. When we get up in the morning Jesus wants to be there at our breakfast table. When we go off to work or to our activities Jesus wants to be there with us. Whatever we are doing in life: being a husband or wife, being a parent, voting for our government leaders, earning money, spending money, or any activity each and every day the question for us should always be: "*What would Jesus do?*"

In the life and ministry of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels, people come to see their true nature by inviting Jesus in. Rich young rulers, children, the lame, religious leaders and politicians often discovered their true motives in an encounter with Jesus. This is one of the hallmarks of the way Jesus reached out to people. Even in the focal event of the cross, one of the criminals discovers his noble character through his anguish.

This is no ordinary King. He doesn't come barging into your life with an army demanding and taking everything. Rather he is a gentleman who knocks at the door and waits for you to open it and invite him in. Once he is in he then begins to ask you to allow him to be a part of your life relinquishing control until one day he is in charge and is ruling your life and you can't imagine life without him.

C.S. Lewis was once asked what are we to make of Christ, and he responded that it is not a question of what we make of him but rather what he intends to make of us.

Thanks be to God.