

Solemnity of Christ the King



Christ the King: Born to Testify to the Truth. Today's Gospel is from the Gospel of John. This Gospel loves showing contrasting opinions and situations. It uses irony as an art form. This is the Gospel of the Man Born Blind who could clearly see better than the Pharisees. This is the Gospel of the Woman at the Well who was thirsty and the thirsty Jesus who himself was a Living Well. This is the Gospel where the soldiers came to arrest Jesus and fell on their faces before him.

The highest point of the Gospel's irony is seen in today's reading, Jesus before Pilate. Pilate was the representative of Rome. His palace, his garb, his demeanor radiated the power of the Roman Empire. Jesus was a commoner, an itinerant preacher, a carpenter. There was nothing about him that would throw a powerful man in fear. Jesus held no titles. He was not supported by an army. He didn't even wear armor or carry a sword. So here was this weak Jesus, standing before the powerful Pilate. Was Pilate mocking Jesus or intrigued when he asked him, "Are you a king?" We don't know. But we do know that Jesus' answer threw Pilate for a loop. "You yourself say that I am a king. For this I have come, to testify to the truth."

To testify to the truth. That is what true royalty is about. This feast of Christ the King is about testifying to the truth. It is about integrity.

There is a great scene in the play *A Man for All Seasons* that fits so well here. You might remember that the play was about the determination of St. Thomas More to stand for the faith against the persuasion and eventually persecution of Henry VIII of England. In the scene I'm referring to, Henry VIII is trying to coax his second in charge, Thomas More, to agree with him that it is proper for him, the King, to divorce his wife Catherine since she was his sister-in-law and since she did not give birth to a male heir to the Kingdom. After the King made all his arguments, Thomas More said that he himself was unfit to meddle in this argument and the King should take it to Rome. Henry VIII retorted that he didn't need a pope to tell him what he could or couldn't do. Then we come to the center point. Thomas More asks the King, "Why do you need my support?" Henry VIII replies with words we would all love to hear said about each of us, "Because, Thomas, you are honest. And what is more to the point, you are known to be honest. There are plenty in the Kingdom who support me, but some do so only out of fear and others only out of what they can get for their support. But you are different. And people know it. That is why I need your support."

In the presence of integrity, Henry VIII knew who was King and who was subject.

The patron of our parish, St. Ignatius of Antioch, was the second most powerful Christian in the Roman Empire, second only to the Bishop of Rome. He had written letters to Christians to stand up for the faith in the face of persecution. And then he, as a venerable old man, was arrested. He was put on a ship that would eventually end up sending its cargo to Rome. There he would be fed to the lions in the Colosseum. Many early Christians could not bear the thought of losing Ignatius. He was too important, too needed in the Church. They plotted to raise money to bribe the sailors in one of the ports the ship would stop before reaching Rome. They had plenty of time to do so, the trip would take two to three years. Evidently they also had plenty of money. Wealthy Christians were determined to save Ignatius. They just didn't understand Ignatius' integrity. He was not going to buy his way out of a fate that he had encouraged others to have the courage to accept. Nor was he going to use some sort of skillful legalese to save his skin. So he walked into the Colosseum with the other Christians in control of the direction of his life. He was a frail old man; yet, he was more powerful than the lions who would destroy him or the Romans who did not have the courage to stop the absurd spectacle. Ignatius was a man of integrity.

Ignatius of Antioch and Thomas More and so many others followed Jesus Christ in being people of integrity. The powerful Pilate could have Jesus tortured and killed, and he did, but Pilate himself remained a prisoner because he lived a lie. And Jesus remained a King because he testified to the truth to his last breath.

“Then you are a King?” Pilate asked. And Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. For this was I born...to testify to the truth.”

This gospel, this feast of Christ the King reminds us that each of us was born for this same reason, to testify to the truth. And what is the truth? Jesus Christ is the truth, and the way, and the life.

Christ Jesus, Victor over the forces of evil, give us each the courage to stand against the horrible lie of the world that happiness is found apart from you. Give us the courage to proclaim your life with every action of our lives. Help us to be as individuals and as a Church, people of integrity, people who demonstrate with their every action that you, Jesus Christ, are our King.

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