

Sermon Feast of Christ the King Year A 2020

At the start of this month we celebrated the great feast of All Saints. The dedication of this church makes that feast our patronal festival. And each year this celebration gives us pause to remember the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us and whom we are assured live in the closer presence of God. Amongst the saints we remember chiefly the Blessed Virgin Mary and John the Baptist. We remember, too, Joseph and the apostles, evangelists, martyrs, confessors, doctors, holy virgins, and all the rest we might simply know as 'the holy men and women'. And amongst these is a category we perhaps do not think much on: the royal saints and blessed - the kings, queens, princes, princesses, dukes, duchesses, and other royal rulers who are venerated, beatified, or canonized by Catholics, Orthodox, and Anglicans even. They make for a somewhat eclectic and ecumenical list. But it's a list which offers food for thought, since all of these individuals in obvious ways promoted and defended the faith using their God-given political authority.

Amongst a list that could be as long as my arm are many names you will know. Others perhaps less familiar. And from many lands and from every age: Alfred the Great. Charles I. Charlemagne. Margaret of Scotland and her son David. Edward the Confessor. Æthelbert of Kent. Bl Karl I of Austria. Justinian the Roman emperor. Oswald of Northumbria. St Louis of France. St Stephen of Hungary. St Wenceslaus. St Helana, mother of Constantine. Margaret of Hungary. Queen Emma of Hawaii.

In this church of All Saints, and on this feast of Christ the King, these figures help make clear just what the mission of the saints in history *is*: to be the living members of the Mystical Body under Christ its Head, and to extend this body across the whole earth. Our faith affirms that Our Lord Jesus Christ *is* the King of all men, all peoples, all nations. And His saints are those who, taking up their cross and following Him, have conquered their own souls and won over the souls of many others for this Kingdom.

Importantly, that eclectic list of sainted rulers saw that the State or Empire or whatever form of government the various people of the world fall under, *is subordinate* to the Church. And they recognised that this earthly life is subordinate to the life of the world to come. What's more, they did not allow their rule to obscure Christ's rule, and in fact worked – *as all God's people must* - to extend it.

Whatever high station divine providence had afforded them, they show us that there is a higher authority yet to whom they owed their obedience, to whom their lives must conform, and to whom they must one day ultimately - as the gospel today reminds us, - be accountable. The story told us in today's gospel speaks of the king sitting in judgement. Whatever power, authority, wealth, privilege, influence and honour bestowed on any earthly ruler, there is one Other who yet rules over *them*. Any earthly ruler must realise that theirs is temporary, provisional, transient. And rather than seeking to set up competing kingdoms, the sainted princes instead *joined* their rule to Christ's rule.

Now, I do not propose their lives and faithful witness to commend a particular political system. But we must be careful to not dismiss their witness because of our prejudice. And we must not make the mistake of thinking that the saints were perfect (there is no perfection this side of heaven!) Even the saints are marked by human failings and the limitations of time and culture, which are so often amplified in the lives of our leaders. We might ask, though, where does modern democracy give us examples of sanctity? Where are the dozens of holy presidents, prime ministers, cabinet members, parliamentarians, or mayors? Still, the church in her wisdom, and according to God's good grace, can operate and cooperate within many and varied political systems, except those, of course which have an explicit intention of denying the reality of God and of actively suppressing faith.

Totalitarian governments - wherever we find them - so despise the church and faithful believers by the very fact that our allegiance is owed to something, indeed someone, else. Totalitarianism - of whatever expression - does what it says on the box: it seeks total control of our lives! But to this the faithful Christians must say, No! There is always a higher authority to which we are answerable! There is always another set of values which are to shape our lives. There is always a limit to the degree to which we can cooperate with state's intrusions into our lives. 'Jesus is Lord' marks that limit. The blood-stained pages of the 20th century show us the results of political systems which refuse to submit to the rule of Christ.

Now this assertion - Jesus is Lord - is in fact the earliest and most basic of the Christian creeds. It is easy to say and may seem obvious to us as faithful believers. But in fact, it needs restressing and reasserting because to most people it is not obvious. Most people do not live their lives with Christ as Lord, allowing him to rule over them.

Most people in modern western liberal democracies, after 250 years of enlightenment rationalism, live with no higher authority than themselves. Even most people in our churches, it must be said, now conduct themselves in this way. The collapse of the church these past few generations has shown this! If Christ's rule or law is shown to be inconvenient or unsettling, it is simply argued away, dismissed as embarrassing and unnecessary. But it shows that remove Christ from his throne, remove Christ from the centre of our lives then it all begins to collapse around us.

The great paradox of the gospel is that authentic human freedom comes by obedience; that human flourishing in fact comes through submission. The mystery of the gospel is that it is by dying we find life! We become what we were meant to be - discover our true identity, in modern speak – not by asserting our desires, and acting on our personal preferences. No! We become what we are meant to be through obedience, by saying 'no' to the self. Modern man can barely comprehend this concept. And this is why the example of the sainted rulers so confounds modern man, but exactly what makes them so helpful to us! Because despite their privilege, power, wealth, honour, influence and fame – in other words, having everything going for them! – they recognised that ultimate meaning comes from submitting to the rule of Christ.

Now, we face the difficulty that when we speak of Christ's rule, we mostly think of this as applying simply to the personal and individual. And this the result of the very recent protestant emphasis on personal conversion: Jesus is Lord of my heart, and that sort of thing. There is nothing wrong in this, but it is not enough.

If we affirm Christ's kingship, by necessity there is a *kingdom*. There must always be a social, communal, indeed political dimension to faith. We must not accept, then, the premise that our society is best served when Christians remain silent in the public sphere. For sure, we are now in position where we must be *discerning* about our forays into the public square. Not every issue is worth our energy and not every debate is worth dying a martyr. But a faith which is simply interior and private means we in fact exclude Christ from the bulk of our lives.

The example of the sainted royals reminds us we must participate in *the extension* of Christ's rule, which cannot occur if we just permit him a rule over our private and interior selves. It is surely through an *integrated life* – where Christ is permitted to direct both the interior and exterior, the private and public dimensions of our lives, our thoughts and our deeds – that his effectual rule is shown to have taken hold. Human flourishing comes when we accept the essential Christian truth that all things *are* subjected to Christ! And his rule and his kingdom know no bounds. Amen.