

Sermon Feast of Christ the King Year A 2017

The (somewhat) pessimistic writer of Ecclesiastes declares that *'there is nothing new under the sun.'* And the saying goes that, *'those who do not learn from the errors of the past are doomed to repeat them.'* In the 1926 Mexico came to be governed by a fiercely anti-clerical and anti-Catholic President Plutarco Elías Calles. He begun what writer Graham Greene would call the *"fiercest persecution of religion anywhere since the reign of Elizabeth."* Calles worked to enforce the 1917 constitution of Mexico in which five articles of that constitution were particularly aimed at the suppression of the Church. It mandated secular education in school and prohibited the Church from participating in primary and secondary education. It outlawed monastic orders, forbade public worship outside of church buildings and restricted the rights of religious organizations to own property. Finally, it revoked basic civil rights of the clergy: priests and religious workers were prevented from wearing their habits, were denied the right to vote, and were forbidden from commenting on public affairs in the press.

Into this context emerged the young priest Miguel Pro. Born in 1891 in Guadalupe, he joined the Jesuits as a young man. The rising tide of anticlericalism saw his novitiate dissolved, he was exiled and continued his studies in California and Granada, Spain. In 1926, having finished his studies, Miguel returned to Mexico. This was the same year the new president implemented penalties for priests who criticized the government (five years' imprisonment) or wore clerical garb outside their churches. Some states closed all the churches and cleared them of its priests, killing many of them, forcing a few to marry. The remaining few served covertly at risk of their lives. On his return Miguel served an underground church, almost the last priest of standing...

After being (falsely) accused of involvement in a failed assassination attempt of the former president, Miguel was arrested and executed without trial. The president ordered that the execution be photographed and newspapers the next day published them on the front page. As the young priest walked from his cell to the courtyard and the firing squad, he blessed the soldiers, knelt, and briefly prayed quietly – his final request. Declining a blindfold, he faced his executioners with a crucifix in one hand and a rosary in the other. With arms outstretched he cried, *"May God have mercy on you! May God bless you! Lord, Thou knowest that I am innocent! With all my heart I forgive my enemies!"* Before the firing squad ordered to shoot, his defiant last words, *"Viva Cristo Rey!" – "Long live Christ the King!" ... "Long live Christ the King!"* This was this slogan adopted by the *Cristeros*, those who struggled against the secularist, anti-clerical and anti-church regime. By recognising that in Christ the King lay their ultimate allegiance, the *Cristeros* rightfully saw the inspiration for their struggle.

"Long live Christ the King!" This bold affirmation of faith is of course but a variation of the oldest Christian affirmation of faith: *'Jesus is Lord.'* This three-word confession is probably the most basic and earliest of all Christian creeds and weaves itself through many of the New Testament letters. It was seen as the core belief, the central belief, the *defining* belief for the early

Christian community - as for us... To say, 'Jesus is Lord' was for the first Christians a truly radical claim. Because there were others who were also insisting they were 'lord', namely Caesar, the Roman emperor. The Caesar's were considered divine, to be gods. To say, 'Jesus is Lord', then, was to say Caesar *wasn't*. The claims that Caesar and the empire were trying to make had no hold on the Christian. Their allegiance lay elsewhere. And to say, 'Jesus is Lord' was a way of undermining all the claims the empire was seeking to make for itself. But for those disillusioned with the governance of empire, 'Jesus is Lord' was a powerful alternative.

On this feast of Christ the King, it is right to consider once more that earliest, most basic of Christian assertions: the lordship of Christ. Yet we know how competing claims for our loyalty press hard against us. We feel in ourselves rival claims for our allegiance. We know how much power the state tries to gather to itself. But as people of faith we must know to whom we pay ultimate allegiance, who is our Lord? If Christ is not lord over our lives, then he is nothing... Our God is a jealous God, and he is revealed to us as Truth. Such an absolute statement of faith is not easily accommodated with the idea that we must simply take our place alongside all others; that all ideas, philosophies, opinions are equal and that we must either put up or shut up. Authentic Christian witness though, does not allow for quiet submission. But history shows - and the witness of the martyrs - time and again how threatening allegiance to Christ is perceived. The now numerous secularists experiments consistently show how intolerant they are to those who pin their allegiance to Christ. Whether Imperial Rome, or revolutionary France, revolutionary Russia, Nazi Germany, or anticlerical Mexico, the story has always been to expel God. God so often seen as the 'enemy' because - quite simply - he inspires alternative allegiance. And for faithful Christians the story has always been: *the equation of dissent with treachery*. Allegiance to Christ, confessing him as king - as Lord - is consistently seen as dangerous.

Confessing Christ as King is so threatening because we can never subscribe whole-heartedly to *any* programme of reform or revolution. We cannot submit to alternative claims for our allegiance. One of the greatest strengths and points of attraction for the early church was that there could be no accommodation with Empire as long as it made conflicting claims on ultimate allegiance. For the Christian there is one allegiance: Jesus the Lord. As a church we need to reclaim that confidence. Don't be looking to 'empire' to deliver peace and fulfilment! They won't - they can't - deliver.

I would suggest that large swathes of the church have succumbed to a hollow peace offered us. For decades now, the church has played an experiment to be more appealing, attractive, relevant. In other words, letting the 'empire' determine our agenda, dividing our allegiance. Just yesterday news came out that the church in Sweden is seeking to remove from its worship any reference to Jesus as Lord. Too embarrassing, too difficult, too demanding. Inevitable of course, when your agenda and commitments are not determined by humble submission to Christ and the truth he has revealed to his church. Yes. It is difficult to confess Jesus as Lord, to allow him to rule our hearts, our lives, our church. But the basic assertion, 'Jesus is Lord' is a truth we cannot compromise; a truth we cannot abandon.

President Calles in November 1927 – 90 years this past week - thought that by executing his troublesome priest he had silenced him. The President thought that seeing pictures of Miguel Pro's execution would frighten the Cristero rebels. It had, however, the opposite effect. A throng of 40,000 lined Pro's funeral procession and another 20,000 waited at the cemetery. He was buried without a priest present, his father saying the final words. His death saw the Cristeros become *more* animated and fight with *renewed* enthusiasm, many of them carrying the newspaper photo of Miguel before the firing squad. Let us pray that we too may have the strength to defiantly say to the lords competing for our allegiance - *Viva Christo Rey - Long live Christ the King!*