

## *The Solemnity of Christ the King*

By **Randall Smith, PhD**

November 22 – Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

Readings: Ezekiel 34.11-12, 15-17; Psalm 23.1-6; 1 Corinthians 15.20-26, 28; Matthew 25.31-46

---

Three of the most common images of Christ in Christian art and iconography are Christ as a shepherd, Christ at the Last Judgment, and Christ on the cross. Although we think of the image of Christ on the cross as the most common, actually the first and most common image we find in the early Church was of Jesus as a young shepherd carrying a sheep on his shoulders. (See John 10.11-18; for images, see “Three of the Oldest Images of Jesus.”) And as anyone who has traveled in Europe or Latin America knows, it is common to find images of Christ at the Last Judgment, with the saved rising from the dead on his right hand, and the condemned descending into the depths on his left. One often finds this image carved in stone over the front door of the church. (For the Last Judgment, see especially Matt 7.13-23 and Luke 13.23-28. See also Rev 20.11-12; Dan 7.9-10; Matt 3.10-12; Matt 13.40-43; Luke 12.4-5.)

### A Different Kind of King

It is one of the great paradoxes of our faith, reflected in the readings we get this year and every year on this solemnity, that Christ reveals Himself as “king” by serving others rather than being served. This is a very different sort of “king.” Indeed, it is to take the notion of king and turn it on its head. He who is the head serves all the rest. (For Christ as head, see Eph 1.22, 4.12; Col 1.18, 2.10.) Rather than the people sacrificing their lives for their king, the king sacrifices His life for His people.

This year (Year A), the reading from the Gospel of Matthew portrays Jesus as the final judge of history. Next year (Year B), we will have a reading from the Gospel of John (John 18.33-37) in which Pilate asks Jesus, “Are you a king?”, to which Christ replies: “My kingdom is not of this world.” Last year, the reading was from the Gospel of Luke (Luke 23.33-43), with its dramatic account of Christ on the cross. Above his head, Pilate had posted a sign with the words “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” This account of the crucifixion in Luke and the one in John where Christ appears before Pilate should call to mind Pilate’s taunt when he presented Jesus to the crowd: “Behold your king.” It is a phrase that should echo in our ears every time we look upon the cross. This indeed is our king — the shepherd king who was sent to the “lost sheep of Israel”; the king who loved us so much that He gave His life for us; the king who is the still-point at the center of the swirling currents of history. (See T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton”: “at the still point of the turning world.”) The love that He expresses and embodies challenges us and serves as the standard against which all expressions of power must be judged. Where is Pilate now? Where is the great Roman Empire now? They, and all such empires of power and military force, are swept away by the currents of history. Christ, the Good Shepherd, the one who serves, remains. Christ is risen. Christ lives. (See Matt 28.6; Mark 16.6, 14; Luke 24.34; 2 Tim 2.8; 1 Cor 15.20; John 21.14). He is, as the Book of Revelation tells us: “Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” — He is the one “who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood” (Rev 1.5).

## Christus Regnat!

We must decide what sort of king we wish to be. As we plot out our own future, how often do we think of it in terms of control rather than service — control of others, control of institutions, control of our destinies? We want institutions to *serve us*, to “make straight the path” for *me*, rather than us “making straight the path” for the Lord. (See especially John 1.23; Matt 3.3; Mark 1.3; Luke 3.4. See also Isa 40.3; Prov 3.6; Ps 5.8; Isa 26.7; Isa 45.13; Jer 31.9). We want others to make our lives easier, not more complicated. And we resent it when history throws us unexpected setbacks, like a pandemic, a natural disaster, or a stock market crash. We expect our progress to be a straight-line upward with perhaps only momentary pauses. Shouldn’t all things work together to bring about our personal self-benefit? (See Rom 8.28.) It is troubling to find that the world does not revolve around us. It seems silly to say, but we should be honest with ourselves how often we implicitly assume that, somehow, it *should*.

But, then again, perhaps it does, just not in the way we expect (Rom 8.28). We should at least consider the possibility that we would be better off if we let *Christ* be king — king of history and king of our lives.

How is He to be the king of our lives? Instead of attempting to control others, perhaps we would be better served serving them in imitation of the Good Shepherd. We should wash the feet of others (John 13.2-17). We should heal the sick, bind up their injuries, and shepherd the lost rightly. We should feed the hungry, clothe the poor, care for the sick, visit the prisoner, welcome the stranger, and give clean water to those who thirst. If the king came to your door and asked for a cup of water, would you turn him away? Has Christ not made clear that, “as you do it to the least of these, so you do it to me?”

Often we say, “But I am such a little creature in a big world. What difference can I make?” Would it help if Christ had said, “What the least of you little ones do to others, so also I do”? Did He not in effect tell us this in the story of the poor widow who, coming into the Temple, put two small copper coins in the offering, which was all she had. They gave out of their wealth; she out of her poverty. But she was closer to the Kingdom of God.

Who would have thought that the death of an obscure Nazorean in a poor, dusty out-of-the-way province in the great and powerful Roman Empire would turn out to be the central turning point of all history? The lesson here is that you should never let the world convince you that small acts of sacrifice, service, and kindness aren’t of world historical importance.

But if we give ourselves to others in service in this way, will we not lose control of our own lives? If I stand up for justice, won’t I risk being punished? If I speak the truth the crowd dislikes, won’t I get persecuted? (See the Beatitudes, Matt 5.1-11). People might take advantage of me; I might lose control of my destiny; I might not be a “success.” The Gospel is not a demand that we be thoughtless about our future. But it also bids us remember that Christ is the Lord of History, and any dreams we have about controlling our destinies are largely illusory. (Matt 6.27; Luke 12.24; Jas 4.13-17; Prov 16.9.)

When St. Maximilian Kolbe found himself in Auschwitz — a fate he had certainly not intended for himself, not the place he foresaw himself living out his life — he realized at a key moment that what still remained after all else was taken away was his ability to be like his king — his ability to serve and give his life for others. He let Christ be the Lord of His life.

His Nazi guards, instruments of what was to be the next “thousand-year *reich*” or rule, undoubtedly thought they had simply obliterated him, negated his very existence. But had they? Not if Christ has defeated death itself; not if Christ’s resurrection from the dead is the first fruits of what we too will enjoy; not if Christ is the ultimate judge of history.

Did these guards not know that God sees all and judges all? (Heb 4.13; Jer 17.10; 1 Chr 28.9; Prov 5.21; Rom 2.16; 1 Cor 4.5; Amos 9.1-4.) If they had, should they not have been shaken with terror at what they were doing? Most of them went to church on Sunday; some went to Catholic Mass. What did they think the words, such as the ones we hear in the Gospel today, meant? “Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me. And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” Did they really *hear* them as the words of their king?

Where is the great Nazi thousand year kingdom now? Where are all those who esteemed themselves as “lords” ruling the earth? They exist only in infamy. But St. Maximilian Kolbe and all those “little ones” whose existence was supposedly negated, they live on, both in our hearts and in the bosom of Abraham, as members of the Body of Christ. They live on, “in verdant pastures,” beside “restful waters,” dwelling in the house of the Lord, where they enjoy the heavenly banquet, rejoicing forever in God’s presence.

So today, let us remember: the shepherd (the king who serves); the cross (we must bear ours every day), and the Last Judgment. Christ, the Good Shepherd, the broken body on the cross — *He* is the Lord of History. He has won the final victory over sin and death. He will judge “every sovereignty and every authority and power.” He is the one who has redeemed the world and is subjecting it to His Father so that God may be all in all.” Let’s let him be the Lord of our lives, the king of our hearts, thoughts, and deeds. Amen.

*Randall Smith, PhD, holds the Scanlan Foundation Chair in Theology at the University of St. Thomas, Houston. He is the author of [Reading the Sermons of Thomas Aquinas: A Beginner’s Guide](#)*

### **For Further Reading**

- Z. Caldwell, "[Three of the Oldest Images of Jesus](#)"
- [Catechism of the Catholic Church # 786](#)
- Alison Morgan, "[Images of the Last Judgment in Christian Iconography](#)"
- [Pope Pius XI, Quas Primas](#)
- [U.S.C.B. on the feast](#)
- [Images of the Last Judgment](#)
- For a different take from Protestant sources, see [Westminster Shorter Catechism](#)

### **In Short . . .**

- *Three of the most common images of Christ in Christian art and iconography are Christ as a shepherd, Christ at the Last Judgment, and Christ on the cross. All three are images associated with this solemnity.*
- *Christ reveals Himself to be the "king" as "the Good Shepherd," by serving others rather than being served, even to the point of sacrificing Himself for us on the cross, where above His head were posted the words "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."*
- *Christ our King serves as the standard against which all expressions of power must be judged*
- *How is Christ to be the king of our lives? Instead of attempting to control others, we would be better served serving them in imitation of the Good Shepherd.*
- *So today, let us remember: the shepherd (the king who serves); the cross (we must bear ours every day), and the Last Judgment. Christ, the Good Shepherd, the broken body on the cross — He is the Lord of History. He has won the final victory over sin and death. He will judge "every sovereignty and every authority and power." He is the one who has redeemed the world and is subjecting it to His Father so that God may be all in all." Let's let him be the Lord of our lives, the king of our hearts, thoughts, and deeds.*