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Elizabeth Shaw, Editor

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The Permanent Relevance of the Kingship of Christ

By Donald Cardinal Wuerl

Solemnity of Christ the King
November 24, 2013

*Readings: 2 Samuel 5.1-3;
Colossians 1.12-20; Luke 23.35-43*

The Year of Faith comes to a close on this Solemnity of Christ the King. However, the call of Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis to continually renew our faith and share it with others, building up the kingdom of God, is ongoing. This is our perennial mission.

The kingship of Christ is not only relevant but essential, in every season and age, in every society. Reality itself is born of the incarnate Word. "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together," we read in the letter to the Colossians and, as Pope Benedict adds, "This realism is particularly needed in our own time, when many things in which we trust for building our lives, things in which we are tempted to put our hopes, prove ephemeral" (*Verbum domini*, 10).

***"Above him there was an inscription that read,
"This is the King of the Jews." (Lk 23.38)***

Earthly powers have historically tended to view God and his kingdom as an adversary, as a threat to their own dominion over people. Indeed, it was talk of the kingdom of God that frightened Pontius Pilate into sentencing Jesus to death.

Crowds had sought to kill Jesus before, but the crucifixion was different. This was an execution, an official act of the state, with Pilate boldly telling the Son of God that he had the power of life and death over him. In placing that sign above Jesus on the cross, Pilate was asserting that his authority over men was superior to the kingship of Christ.

Challenges to the reign of God began with Adam putting himself above God's rule. We know, of course, that Adam's choice ended badly. Then after God led his people out of Egypt, after Pharaoh vainly tried to defy God, still they wished for a human king to rule over them, rejecting the Lord as their king (1 Sm 8.7). In spite of God's warnings that the kings of Israel would descend into self-interest and corruption, the people insisted on having a king like any other earthly power.

As it was with Pilate and those who cried out, "We have no king but Caesar," the kingship of Christ has been challenged ever since. In establishing the Solemnity of Christ the King, Pope Pius XI noted that the religion of Christ was "put under the power of the state and tolerated more or less at the whim of princes and rulers. . . . There were even some nations who thought they could dispense with God, and that their religion should consist in impiety and the neglect of God" (*Quas primas*, 24; see also *Spe salvi*, 30).

More recently, various social, cultural, and political trends in the city of man have set themselves up against the kingdom of God. Increasingly, the dominant culture seeks to bleach out appreciation of God and the importance of religious faith. "In place of faith in God," writes Pope Francis, "it seems better to worship an idol, into whose face we can look directly and whose origin we know, because it is the work of our own hands" (*Lumen fidei*, 13). We have even witnessed repeated attempts by governments to assert supremacy over the Church, to presume to dictate who are and are not Christian ministers and what is and is not Christian ministry.

***"He delivered us from the power of darkness and
transferred us to the kingdom of
his beloved Son." (Col 1.13)***

But what is this "kingdom" of God's beloved?

The phrase “kingdom of God” occurs over 120 times in the New Testament. But this is language with which many do not have ready, firsthand experience. The Second Vatican Council describes it as “a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love, and peace. In this kingdom, creation itself will be delivered from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the sons of God” (*Lumen gentium*, 36). Though we now see its beginnings, only in glory with its Lord will we realize the fullness of the kingdom.

No mere poetic metaphor, this kingdom is a living reality – it is the presence of God. The kingdom entered human history through Jesus Christ, who laid the foundation for the enduring presence of God in the Church, his body in the world today. This kingdom does not impose a temporal regime, and it is compatible with any decent earthly government. Its citizens love the good in every community, in every culture, and they reject only that which is harmful to a good and just society. Its citizens work for tranquil order in the lands they inhabit and for lasting peace on earth.

The kingdom is established and grows by the power of truth and grace from God. However, it is precisely on Calvary that Christ demonstrates his kingship and fulfills his work of salvation: “His royal throne is the wood of the Cross,” teaches Pope Francis. “Jesus takes upon himself the evil, the filth, the sin of the world, including the sin of all of us, and he cleanses it, he cleanses it with his blood, with the mercy and the love of God” (Homily for Palm Sunday, March 24, 2013).

“It was you who led the Israelites out and brought them back.” (2 Sm 5.2)

In the work of building up his kingdom, which in its fullness comes only with God in glory, Christ our King calls his disciples to help him. The kingship of Christ today continues to need heralds and witnesses who work and manifest the realm of God, especially in the face of earthly powers that would seek to ignore the place of God in our lives and our world.

Jesus teaches that while we have a duty to submit to lawful government authority, there is a higher law and greater obligation that we owe to God. Pope Francis affirms:

In the context of society, there is only one thing which the Church quite clearly demands: the freedom to proclaim the Gospel in its entirety, even when it runs counter to the world, even when it goes against the tide. The Church wants to make present that spiritual patrimony without which society falls apart and cities are overwhelmed by their own walls, pits and barriers. The Church has the right and the duty to keep alive the flame of human freedom and unity. (Meeting with Bishops of Brazil, July 28, 2013)

Living our Catholic faith, building up the kingdom, is a natural right, our patrimony as rational beings and creatures of God, and not a benefit granted by government. As our courts have ruled, we are “not the mere creature of the state” (*Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, 268 U.S. 510, 1925), and as Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. observed, the Church is neither master nor servant of the state, but its conscience, guide, and critic. The Church has demonstrated that capacity over and over again in history and continues to serve as the “conscience of the state,” even as her freedom to do so is slowly diminished (cf. “Letter from Birmingham Jail”).

The separation of Church and state as it has been long understood does not mean separation of faith and moral values from the public square and the formulation of public policy. Rather, the separation opens the space necessary for both Church and state to influence and form culture. It is right that the Church have the freedom to do so (see *Gaudium et spes*, 76; *Dignitatis humanae*, 4-6; *Deus caritas est*, 28).

Unlike earthly kingdoms, however, ours will take no one by conquest, no one by coercion. Instead, we pray, we befriend, we invite, and we share our faith. We try to persuade as we re-propose the truth and love of Jesus Christ. We speak against inequity and oppression. We stand for human rights, especially the most fundamental right: the right to life. We do not do this work alone, by our own efforts, but only by opening ourselves to God’s grace.

The kingdom of God offers humanity a different way of seeing life and the world around us. We bring a fuller vision of life than that offered by the city of man. In doing so, we exercise our share of the kingship of Christ. Like yeast leavening, like seeds germinating, we seek to bring about change. If enough hearts are changed, the world will also be changed.

“And now we have set foot within your gates, O Jerusalem.” (Ps 122.2)

In the face of many societal and cultural challenges, one might become discouraged, but there is reason to be optimistic. God is part of the lives of the overriding majority of people in our nation. This is demonstrated in poll after poll.

But whether everyone in a pluralistic society believes in him or not, whether “thrones or dominions or principalities or powers” defer to him or not, one lesson from the readings today is that the Risen Christ will have the last word. God’s people *will* set foot inside the gates of his city. It is the lesson of hope, the blessed assurance that *his kingdom will prevail*, that *he reigns supreme*.

“‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He replied to him, ‘Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’” (Lk 23.42-43)

The “good thief,” having been condemned by the state, conceded his wrong and appealed in repentance to Jesus on the cross. The city of man had its judgment against him, but Christ the King offered him mercy. In handing Jesus over to be scourged and crucified, in hanging that sign above his head crowned with thorns, so as to debase and mock him, Pilate raised Jesus up, where his outstretched arms embrace all of creation.

Earthly kingdoms come and go. They may have their moments of glory, but inevitably they all will fade. If you travel abroad, you can visit their ruins and imagine what they were like in their glory days. Jesus’ kingdom is different from those. His “reign is a reign for all ages” and his “dominion for all generations” (Ps 145:13). His kingdom is one of Spirit and truth that endures forever.

About the Author

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FOR FURTHER READING

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“Martin Luther King’s ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail,’” available at:
<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/04/martin-luther-kings-letter-from-birmingham-jail/274668/>

“Novena to Christ the King,” available at: <http://www.ewtn.com/devotionals/novena/christking.htm>

Pius XI, Quas primas, available at:
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_11121925_quas-primas_en.html

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