

Christ's Kingly Power

November 23, 2014

By Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.Solemnity of Christ the King
Readings: Ezekiel 34.11-12, 15-17;
1 Corinthians 15.20-26, 28;
Matthew 25.31-46

Today's feast brings to mind some important questions, including: *What sort of king is Jesus Christ, and what does his kingship mean for us in light of our readings?*

As we approach these questions, let's begin with some background and resources.

Only One God

In his fourth homily on the Book of Exodus, the early Christian scholar Origen wrote that "it is far better to die in the desert than to serve the Egyptians." Those are strong words. They were Origen's firm rebuke to those Hebrews in scripture who longed to go back to slavery in Egypt rather than risk death in the wilderness after their escape (Ex 14:12). For Origen, like Moses, there is only one God, and anything less than trust in God alone is a form of idolatry.

Origen spoke from direct experience. He lived through fierce, periodic persecutions of the Christian community in the late second and early third centuries. And his words echo another great early Christian text, the *Letter to Diognetus*, written in the second century by an anonymous Christian author facing the same bloody violence from the pagan world.

As with Origen, the *Letter* shows no sign of compromise or cowardice in its language – quite the opposite. It mocks the foolishness of pagan idolatry. It warns Diognetus, the pagan, that "these things [made of wood, brass, iron, and silver] that you call gods, these you serve, these you worship, and [in the end] you become altogether like them." In other words, idolatry does not ennoble man; rather, it dehumanizes him. The *Letter* goes on to contrast the emptiness and misery of the pagan world with the mercy and love of the true God, manifested in his son, Jesus Christ.

What's most striking about the *Letter to Diognetus* is not its antiquity, but its value for Christian life right now, today, in an unbelieving and indifferent world. Like the Hebrews who longed for the relative comfort of Egyptian slavery, too often we prefer the noise and material distractions of modern life to the freedom of the gospel.

The first commandment says, "I am the Lord your God, you shall not have foreign gods before me." It doesn't say, "I am your chief adviser," or "I am your life coach," or "I am your elected official." It says, *I am your God, your only God, and you will not ignore me and disgrace the dignity I've given you by whoring after false gods.* Yet we moderns often do exactly that with our addictions to politics, power, technology, entertainment, personal health, and a hundred other little godlings.

The point here is not that things like technology and personal health are themselves bad. Obviously technology serves human dignity in many ways. And personal health is a great blessing. Rather, the point is that *anything* that confuses our priorities, steals our attention, and dethrones God from the center of our lives becomes an idol.

Two Further Notes

The late Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, in his wonderful little book *The Promise*, writes that idolatry has always been – and remains – one of humanity’s deepest temptations. In his words, “paganism always remains a temptation, in its archaic as well as its most developed forms. The power that man has given himself is the most subtle and most modern of these temptations.” Power over the natural world feeds human vanity and man’s illusions of security; it leads us to offer God pious words, but not humble hearts.

But God cannot be fooled. For Lustiger, a church cannot be invented by hanging a cross on the wall of a pagan temple, nor is a Christian nation created merely by drawing a cross on a flag. Christian faith demands radical conversion and a deep commitment to the one true God. And as a result, “unless the water of baptism has . . . penetrated to their hearts,” self-described Christians can be among the very worst idolaters, “disfiguring [Christ]” by their actions, “and then [making] this distortion into their god.”

Here’s one final background note before we turn briefly to the readings.

We live in a democratic age, and democracy, for all of its strengths, can also make people deaf to the language of faith. Alexis de Tocqueville described the difference between democratic man and all of human history before the democratic age as the difference between “two distinct humanities.” Democratic man instinctively distrusts any form of inequality, privilege, or hierarchy. All legitimacy in a democracy flows from the sovereign individual and the state he helps create. But the Church is a very different kind of community with quite different premises, starting with the premise of a sovereign Creator and Author of life.

Little of this is meat for a Sunday homily. Yet it’s vital to remember nonetheless. The content of biblical faith, and especially the language of “lordship” or “kingship,” can seem outdated or alien to some. The Solemnity of Christ the King is a good moment to help people see their own mortality and the temporary nature of all created things, but also to rejoice in the love that God has for each of us – the God who is our deliverer and the lord of the *real* “real world,” which is so much larger than everyday life.

Now let’s turn to the readings.

Three Simple Realities

The passage from Ezekiel today is useful not just for its content, but also for its context. In earlier verses of this chapter, God harshly criticizes the shepherds of Israel – in other words, its religious leaders – for fattening themselves while neglecting and starving the sheep in their care. Wild beasts have scattered the flock. The shepherds have done nothing.

So God will personally intervene. He will be the shepherd. And the language of the passage shows us the nature of God himself. He will *seek out* and *rescue* the lost. He will *bring back* the strayed and *bind up* the injured. He will *heal* the sick. At the same time, he will *shepherd* the flock in justice. That means he will *destroy* the sleek and the strong. He will *judge* between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats. Each of these verbs suggests a kind of parental presence. The God we worship is a God of compassion and intimate concern, a God of tenderness focused not just on numbers or the good of the flock, but on each individual sheep. He is also a God of justice, keenly aware of good and evil. He has expectations about the behavior of his flock.

The reading from 1 Corinthians outlines the unique relationship of Jesus Christ to God the Father. His resurrection opens the door to eternal life for all who belong to him. He alone has God's mandate to subject all enemies to God's sovereignty and vanquish death itself. His kingship is shared with no one. And it's not merely metaphorical, but material and coercive against all who stand against God. He has authority, but along with authority, real *power*.

Finally, the nature of Christ's kingly power is revealed in the gospel reading. Jesus came first as an expression of God's humility and mercy in the poverty of Bethlehem. Now, at the end of time, he returns on a throne in glory, the executor of God's justice. He alone rules. He alone judges. There is no opinion polling, no rebuttal from defense attorneys, no court of appeal. The same standards of a righteous life are equally applied to all, and the ranks of the nations are divided for eternal joy or loss. This is the Christ of sober grandeur and truth. This is the Christ who demands an accounting for all idolatries, great and small; and who rewards all faithfulness forever.

As the Church year closes and we wait on the threshold of another beginning – a new Advent season – today's readings remind us of three simple realities. God loves us infinitely and with a Father's tenderness. God's ways will be done with or without our approval. And our choices and actions matter – not just in this life, but into the next.

About the Author

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FOR FURTHER READING

Rev. Bevil Bramwell, O.M.I., "Christ the King," *The Catholic Thing* (November 25, 2012), available at: <http://www.thecatholicthing.org/columns/2012/christ-the-king.html>

Most Rev. Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap., "'We Have No King But Caesar': Some Thoughts on Catholic Faith and Public Life," *Villanova Law Review* 58, no. 3 (2013), available at: http://lawweb2009.law.villanova.edu/lawreview/?page_id=1858

Francis, *Homily at Year of Faith Closing Mass*, available at: <http://en.radiovaticana.va/storico/2013/11/24>

Rev. Jean Galot, S.J., "Solemnity of Christ the King," available at: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/Doctrine/Christking.HTM>

Carl Olson, "Opening the Word: Christ's Kingship," *Our Sunday Visitor* (November 10, 2010), available at: <https://www.osv.com/OSVNewsweekly/National>

Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, available at: <http://muse.jhu.edu/books/9780813211718>

IN SHORT . . .

- ***Often we prefer the material distractions of modern life, but anything that confuses our priorities and dethrones God from the center of our lives becomes an idol.***
- ***Democracy, for all of its strengths, can also make people deaf to the language of faith; for legitimacy in a democracy flows from the sovereign individual and the state he helps create.***
- ***But the Church is a very different kind of community with quite different premises, starting with the premise of a sovereign Creator and Author of life.***
- ***The God we worship is a God of compassion and intimate concern, but he is also a God of justice, keenly aware of good and evil. He has expectations about the behavior of his flock.***
- ***Christ's kingship is not merely metaphorical, but material and coercive against all who stand against God. He has both authority and real power.***
- ***Jesus came first as an expression of God's humility and mercy in the poverty of Bethlehem, but he will return to demand an accounting for all idolatries, and to reward all faithfulness forever.***