

Christ the King of Love

November 20, 2016
The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

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

By Rev. Brian Mullady, O.P.

Plato maintained that the difference between a true government and a tyranny was not whether the society was ruled by one man or many. Instead, the determinative factor was how much any ruling body preferred the common good to the private good of the rulers. Democracies could be just as tyrannical as monarchies or oligarchies, if the rulers were interested only in themselves.

Though he was speaking only of civil government, the same is true of religions and ultimately of the whole human race. The final common good of the universe is the glorification of God as its origin, which can be accomplished finally only through human beings who have unity with him in heaven. The grace to attain this end was given man in his original creation but then lost through the sin our first parents. It was to be recovered in the Messiah, and the community of Israel was founded by God through the Old Covenant to prepare the people for his coming.

From David to Christ

There were three cultic mediators or rulers in the Old Testament central to implementing the covenant in Israel: the priest, the prophet, and the king. The priest offered sacrifice, the prophet spoke the truth as to the conduct of the people in living the letter and the spirit of the law, and the king guided the Israelites in their living of the law.

The greatest of the kings was David. The people offered David kingship because they were convinced that the Lord had chosen him as a man of destiny, for they witnessed his courage and nobility of character in both suffering and victory. In David's anointing by the prophet Samuel, there are three reasons given for his receiving the crown: kinship, his military record, and the will of God. The king in Israel was compared to a shepherd. In fact, God has said: "You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel" (2 Sam 5.2). As a ratification of the king's office to make good laws and thus to be a holy instrument of God, King David "made a covenant with them at Hebron before the Lord" (2 Sam 5.3). The good shepherd king was always to prefer the common good of the people to his own private good. In this case the common good was the pursuit of holiness.

God's grace in choosing David would never depart from the inheritance promised at the foundation of the community, which was not a political community but a "people of God" established by the law of Moses in order to prepare a holy nation. From this holy nation would come the Messiah, the ultimate anointed person, as he was also a prophet and a priest. He would give the final freedom of the truth of grace through his rule.

St. Paul attributes this very mission to Christ, the last and greatest of the kings of Israel, the descendant of David who would have absolute primacy, before God as the Word and before men as the Word made flesh: "He is the image of the invisible God" (Col 1.12-20). Since the world was created "in him . . . through him and for him" (Col 1.16), Christ, the ultimate anointed Person, does not have a material earthly reign, but is the King of hearts. He does not give away earthly kingdoms, but heavenly ones. His lordship is caused by the grace of the hypostatic union. As the Person of the Word who always lives at the right hand of the Father, he is conceived in time in Mary's womb by the action of the Holy Spirit.

When Pilate wrote “This is the King of the Jews” over the cross, he was demonstrating the final fulfillment of kingship in the ancient world, though he did not know it. Christ is a ruler who governs by reason and law. But the reason in question is divine reason, and the law is the law of God, a law of love. Human rulers are exalted for their service in throne, crown, and scepter. Christ’s honor and his exaltation as a king, however, consist primarily in his humiliation in the redemption and the atonement. His throne is the cross, his crown thorns, and his scepter the reed.

The kingship of Christ is demonstrated in his action of atonement, in which he seeks to lead the human race back to grace and thus ultimately to paradise. This fact is seen in the prayer of the good thief on the cross: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Lk 23.42). In his final humiliation as High Priest, Christ sacrificed himself on the cross so that his kingship over the human race would be made clear to man.

This is what the Preface for today’s solemnity of Christ the King says: “For you anointed your Only begotten Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, with the oil of gladness, as eternal Priest and King of all creation, so that, by offering himself on the altar of the Cross as a spotless sacrifice to bring us peace, he might accomplish the mysteries of human redemption, and, making all created things subject to his rule, he might present to the immensity of your majesty an eternal and universal kingdom, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace.”

Why Such a Cost

The necessity of the cross, the crown, and the reed comes from the justice of God in atonement for the original sin. This sin was a sin of nature, but it had a twofold character. The first was the fault that occurred as a result of the unloving disobedience of our first parents. The second was the corresponding punishments that were also of a twofold character. The principal punishment is the loss of grace, the loss of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the heart of man. The second is seen in the material effects that afflict all the powers of man: ignorance in the intellect, malice in the will, egotism in the passions, and death in the body. Accordingly, the atonement must involve a twofold action corresponding, respectively, to the fault and punishment for this sin.

For atonement, a person with a human will must exercise some action of loving obedience. This must be done by a person with a human will precisely because the offense was caused by someone with a human will. God by his absolute power could have simply cured man of sin without this loving obedience. But God is also truth and justice, and it would be contrary to the truth of God to do this. The person exercising obedience need not be a human person, but such a person must have the use of a human intellect, will, and passions for the act to be a moral act. Such was the case with Christ, the divine person who was altogether man and thus one who could lovingly obey.

This action of loving obedience must also be done in the face of some punishment incurred for the sin. It would be unfitting for this to involve ignorance, malice, or egotism in the passions, as such things would compromise the freedom of loving obedience. Christ therefore submitted to the only punishments that were nonmoral in character: suffering and death. He chose to submit to these things – but not for himself, for he did not share in the original sin. Instead, he submitted himself to these things freely because by this action he could merit grace for everyone else.

It would have been unreasonable for him to have submitted to individual sufferings connected with diseases specific to some particular person. Instead, he submitted to those punishments that are suffered by the whole human race without distinction. He suffered hunger, thirst, and pain.

The Exaltation of Christ

Death by crucifixion is one of the most painful punishments devised by humanity. In addition to his slow suffocation, Christ was wounded in all his extremities by the nails in his hands and feet, the crown of thorns, the lance piercing his side and heart, the smell of putrefaction, the sight of his sorrowful mother, and the insults of the crowd that he heard. When he was proclaimed “King of the Jews,” this was his royal portion, his crown and throne. When he was lifted high on the cross, passersby saw God reigning in love and grace, offering his life in justice for the common good, for the return of grace to the whole human race. They also witnessed what human wickedness had spawned in this most extreme form of human torture.

The exaltation of Christ in his human nature in the resurrection, ascension, and last judgment is the final response of God to the sacrifice Christ willingly accepted. In his exaltation the purpose of the universe is finally seen as the glorification of God. He is not only the “King of the Jews” but the one who fulfills the promise made to Israel in becoming the King of all human hearts: “By his stripes, we are healed” (Is 53.5).

About the Author

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FOR FURTHER READING

Benedict XVI, “The Importance of Christology: The Theology of the Cross,” General Audience (October 29, 2008), available at: <https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi>

Jonathan Bennett, “Christ the Crucified King,” available at: <http://www.ancient-future.net/kingchrist.html>

Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##595-623.

John Corbett, “King David,” The Catholic Encyclopedia, available at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04642b.htm>

Elise Harris, “Pope Francis: The Path of ‘Humiliation’ Leads Us to Jesus,” available at: <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news>

IN SHORT . . .

- ***Human rulers are exalted for their service in throne, crown, and scepter, but Christ’s honor and his exaltation consist primarily in his humiliation in the redemption and the atonement.***
- ***In his final humiliation, Christ sacrificed himself on the cross so that his kingship over the human race would be made clear to man.***
- ***The necessity of the cross, the crown, and the reed comes from the justice of God in atonement for original sin.***
- ***Christ freely submitted to the only punishments that are nonmoral in character, suffering and death, not for himself but in order to merit grace for everyone else.***
- ***God by his absolute power could have simply cured man of sin without this loving obedience, but God is also truth and justice, and doing so would be contrary to the truth.***
- ***In the exaltation of Christ in the resurrection, ascension, and last judgment, the purpose of the universe is finally seen as the glorification of God.***