

## The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe—Year B

Daniel 7:13-14

Revelation 1:5-8

John 18:33b-37

You could be forgiven if you thought that today's celebration, the Solemnity of Christ the King, went back to the early days of the Church, given that Kingship is a form of leadership that goes back to ancient times. You would, however, be mistaken. Today's Solemnity is deeply rooted in the modern world and is less than 100 years old. Divine Mercy Sunday, celebrated on the Second Sunday of Easter since 2001, is the only other major feast that is younger than today's solemnity.

The Solemnity of Christ the King came into existence on December 11, 1925, the day on which Pope Pius XI, who was Pope from 1922 to his death in 1939, published an encyclical entitled *Quas Primus* (In the First in English). In this document, Pope Pius XI established the Feast of Christ the King, to be celebrated on the last Sunday of October. Following the reforms of the liturgy that took place during the Second Vatican Council, the Solemnity was moved to today, the last Sunday of the Season of Ordinary Time.

This solemnity was Pope Pius XI's response to the world's increasing secularization and fanatical nationalism. The most destructive war up to that time, the First World War, had ended only seven years previously. The Russian Czar had been overthrown and assassinated by the Bolsheviks, and the world's first Communist regime had been established. In western Europe, a Fascist government was established in Italy. In time, Fascist regimes would emerge in other European countries. Pius XI became very anxious about the times in which he was living.

In an earlier writing, a precursor to *Quas Primus*, the Pope said the following: "as long as individuals and states refused to submit to the rule of our Saviour, there would be no really hopeful prospect of a lasting peace among nations". He told the faithful to seek "the Peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ".

"The Word of God, as consubstantial with the Father, has all things in common with him, and therefore has necessarily supreme and absolute dominion over all

things created. In Matthew 28:18 Jesus himself says, “All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” In Revelation 19:16 Christ is recognized as “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.””

Recently canonized Pope St. Paul VI placed an additional title on Christ Jesus, calling him the King of the Universe. This may have been done to not limit Christ’s title of King to that of a mortal king, whose kingship is relegated to a certain time and place. Because Christ himself is eternal, therefore his Kingship is everlasting and everywhere. Pius XI reminded the faithful as much when he wrote:

*It has been long a common custom to give to Christ the metaphorical title of “King”, because of the high degree of perfection whereby he exceeds all creatures. So, he is said to reign in the hearts of people, both by reason of the keenness of his intellect and the extent of his knowledge, and because he is very truth, and it is from him that truth must be obediently received by all humankind.*

Jesus’ authority as King of the Universe, granted by his divinity as Son of God, is made clear in the First Reading. Although the First Reading, drawn from the seventh chapter of the *Book of Daniel*, is an Old Testament book, it is a late Old Testament book. There was already in late Judaism a notion of more than one person in the Godhead. There appears to be two divine persons present in this First reading; one called the “Ancient One” and the other “like a Son of Man.” The scripture scholar John Bergsma noted this when he said:

*Jesus often referred to himself as the “Son of Man” and was very conscious of this passage from Daniel 7 being in reference to himself—who as Son of Man, receiving from God the Father—the Ancient One, “dominion, glory and kingship.””*

The First Reading serves to define his identity.

The Second Reading, drawn from the *Book of Revelation*, presents Jesus as the one who will return as King at the end of history. Many Old Testament allusions are used to describe him. The phrase “first born from the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth” is taken from Psalm 89 and refers to Jesus as Son of David and King over the House of David, which was to rule the whole earth. The phrase “who has made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and father”, is an allusion to God’s promise to Israel at Sinai, where he promises them that they will be a nation of priests if they obey his covenant. The phrase “every eye will see him,

even those who pierced him”, is taken from the *Book of Zechariah* 12:10, which describes the piercing of Jesus on the cross. These Old Testament allusions make it clear that Christ Jesus is the fulfilment of all Old Testament prophecy. He is the Alpha and Omega (the first and last letter of the Greek alphabet), which means he is the beginning and end of all things. All revelation is fulfilled in him.

Given the grand vision of Christ the King, as presented in the First and Second Readings, the Gospel, which is a dialogue between Jesus and Pontius Pilate, appears cozy and intimate in comparison. This dialogue makes it clear that Pilate is not getting it. When he thinks of ‘kingdom’ and ‘king’, his conception is that of a powerful man exercising his authority over a certain people and territory by force, if need be. This, however, is not what Jesus means when he says that he is a king and has a kingdom. For one thing, his kingdom is not of this world, and its values are also not of this world. Paradoxically, however, when the values of Christ’s Kingdom are promoted in this world, the world is transformed and made more wonderful and glorious as it promotes authentic human progress. Quoting John Bergsma again, he says that “while Christ’s Kingdom is not of this world, that doesn’t mean that it is not in this world. The Kingdom of Christ is very much in this world. Its visible manifestation is the Catholic Church...contrary to appearances, it remains a major, perhaps the major, driver of world culture. World institutions and concepts that everyone takes for granted—like the hospital, the university and human rights—come squarely out of the cultural heritage of the Catholic Church, even if their origin is forgotten.” As the tangible manifestation of Christ’s Kingdom, the Church is called to live the transcendent values here, while making her way towards the kingdom to come.

Our heart is not meant to be set for this world, but for the next. We are reminded to not try to shape heaven on earth out of the national and political powers that presently exist, for this will lead to disappointment and catastrophe. Today’s Solemnity reminds us, as we conclude this Season of Ordinary Time and liturgical year, that we are called to struggle, not for the maintenance of a political order, but, as John Bergsma put it, “for holiness, for communion with God, for the salvation of souls, and eternal life. Any other goal is far too low.”

