

## **Homily on the Solemnity of Christ the King**

*Christ reigns from the cross.*

When I read today's Gospel for the Solemnity of Christ the King, I am left with a question: How do we minister to people when they respond with scorn or even outright hatred? The inauguration of Jesus' kingship, where he reigns from the cross, makes this question inescapable. At the moment of the crucifixion, few (if any) witnesses were still thinking about Jesus as the Son of God or the Son of Man, certainly not the triumphant King we celebrate today. Though the disciples later understood the crucifixion through the lens of the resurrection, they did not immediately possess this accurate view. To all but Jesus himself, there is little doubt that despair initially prevailed. There was one notable exception, however; a man tradition names St. Dismas, or "The Good Thief."

Now one of the criminals hanging there reviled Jesus, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us." The other, however, rebuking him, said in reply, "Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation? And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we receive corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal." Then he said, "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 23:39-43)

In response to my question – how to minister to people when they respond with scorn or even outright hatred, this amazing saint seems to have answered it. You recognize the truth of a situation and act on it for the love of God and neighbor, even in the face of opposition or danger.

By recognizing who Jesus was and expressing belief in him on the cross, Dismas used the few agonizing breaths he had left to show reverence to the King of the Universe. Jesus, whom we know to have been enthroned and already reigning from the cross, did

what a king does by granting requests, and Dismas was in for the greatest shock of his life by waking up in heaven.

Both East and West acknowledge this saint: Eastern Orthodoxy memorializing him on Good Friday, and Roman Catholicism on March 25, the same date as the Annunciation. This means that the church wisely recognizes a link between life at its outset, the best and worst it has to offer, and the eternal life which inevitably follows. Though throughout all phases of our earthly lives there will be suffering that counterbalances joy, occasionally a life of criminality followed by one supreme act of contrition and grace at the very end, the lesson for believers to learn is that by persevering in faith, encountering the saving love of God is guaranteed. As God incarnate, Jesus himself commended his spirit and breathed his last only after taking a final opportunity to demonstrate this truth.

To be clear, I'm not suggesting we ought to place ourselves in harm's way. Yet St. Dismas gives us a stellar example of how to follow Christ the King in our own capacities – by recognizing the truth of a situation and acting on it for love of God and neighbor. For some who are called to it, this may in fact involve acting in the face of opposition or danger. We must be very discerning and responsible in considering such matters, however, for the call to actual martyrdom is incredibly rare. We can, however, take risks by reaching out to people who are different and under unfamiliar circumstances that stretch us.

Christ was stretched out and reigned from the cross. As Christians baptized into his royal, prophetic priesthood, this strongly suggests that our moments of greatest vulnerability, weakness, and even apparent failure, are not intrinsic ends. Rather they are

counterbalancing foundations upon which our most powerful invulnerabilities, strengths, and successes are built. In our work, our ministries, even in our relationships, it is at times necessary to stretch ourselves in following Christ the King.

Though we ought to be inspired by St. Dismas and do this, our successes are not measurable with positive results, even when they happen. The success is encountering the suffering Christ in the other person, understanding that we all suffer in the human condition, and placing our comfortable preferences aside so that we can love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God. An alternative is running the risk of being like the other criminal who did not perceive God in his midst, and instead tried to tell Jesus what to do. This person remains anonymous, his life unredeemed, and his fate unknown – to this day no one even knows his name.

Christ the King rules over the entire universe, and can be counted on in all times and under all circumstances. Whether ruling from the cross or in heaven, he always reigns supreme in our hearts if we let him. Not understanding this is the opposition or danger we are most likely to face, that we will resist his will in our lives, and not prioritize the Gospel call to make a difference in the world. My friends, let us follow St. Dismas' example, worshipping Christ not just when things are good, but even when we are stretched to the utmost. We do this for the love of God and neighbor, and all beings the King provides with whom we will build the kingdom of heaven on earth.