

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING

2 Samuel 5: 1-3 Psalm 122 Colossians 1: 12-20 Luke 23: 35-43

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Today’s feast certainly stirs up images of courts, thrones and a vassal doesn’t it?

Today “kingship” is accredited to Christ, to Jesus’ sovereignty over us. What kind of rule and ruler are we celebrating today? When Israel, influenced by the Davidic rule, wants to describe God their ruler, shepherding terms are used. Now, when the notion of shepherd is applied to a king in the Hebrew Scriptures, the normal “ruler-servant” dichotomy used for such roles is changed. A shepherd-king means that the one invested with power must use it to serve those with no power, those being ruled. When the Israelites evaluated their kings, the criteria for whether a king was good or not was how well the sovereign tended to the poor, widows and orphans. God also judged their rulers by the same criteria. While the Israelites may have needed a unifying and caring ruler, they didn’t always get one.

What was needed was for God to step in and show us how power and authority over others is to be used. God has done that with Jesus. He has been invested with sovereignty by God, and he is the shepherd-king who has remained faithful to God by fulfilling the role God intended for all Israel’s rulers----- the role of shepherd. He is the one who searches out and finds the lost and abandoned and leads them to pasture, where the food is rich, the drink is celebratory and the place secure. This Sunday gathering is an example of just such a place. Our shepherd, the Christ, has lead us to this resting place to nourish and provide a place of shelter. Here we gather and renew and are renewed in our commitment to be the people who live in the reign as Christ with him as our only sovereign.

Colossians gives thanks for the care and concern God has made visible in Jesus. God has used God’s power to rescue us. Paul makes it clear that our sins have been forgiven, so we have left behind one realm, that of evil and entered another realm, that of the Son. Praise is offered to Christ who was at God’s side at creation and is above all that was made. Now he is head of “the body the church”. When sin interrupted and disordered the world God created, the Son rescued us from the disorder, achieving victory over death, thus reconciling all God’s creatures. Christ has truly “shepherded” us, caring for us when we were lost. This is the sovereign whose reign we celebrate today.

The Gospel shows this king defeated. He wields no power; there are not troops riding to his rescue. How can he be called “King of the Jews,” except in mockery? It’s the way the world mocks the meek and gentle. “Let’s defeat them and then boast over our victory... and let’s

mock them and rub their faces in defeat!”

One of the criminals hanging next to Jesus challenges his power. The desert temptations that began at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry have not ended there. They have been part of his life, right up till the very end. There it is the voice of the tempter. Will Jesus hold faithfully to his chosen way of life, or will he use the power that has been given him to stir up the masses to rebellion, violence and the seizing of power for himself? Many have used their power and influence over others in just such ways. How difficult it must have been during these final moments of his life to hear that voice again. But another voice speaks up. The other criminal recognized Jesus’ innocence and his true realm. “Jesus remember me when you enter upon your reign.”

Jesus speaks little in Luke’s crucifixion account. In fact, in the entire account the “King” utters only three statements, three “royal decrees”. First Jesus asks that God will forgive them what they are doing to him. As he dies, he voices his trust by surrendering his life into God’s hands. In between these two utterances, he addresses the criminal who requested that Jesus remember him in his reign. The criminal recognizes that he does not deserve entrance, but Jesus is the ruler who uses his power to admit whomever he chooses into life.

In the chapel of San Quentin prison (California), there is a large painting of this “good thief,” traditionally called Dismas. In the painting, Dismas is standing, dressed in a young man’s tunic and smiling at the viewer. It is as if he is smiling over his last “heist,” for in the final minutes, he has stolen paradise. Actually, it was given him free of charge by the battered victim hanging next to him, the “King of the Jews.” The thief recognized the One sent by God. And the last act of the shepherd-king is to shepherd a lost one through the gates to paradise. The last act of Jesus is consistent with his first one, when in Luke’s gospel, he enters the synagogue, and announces his life’s mission (4:18):

“God has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives,
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim
a year acceptable to the Lord.”

Dismas is set free at the last possible moment for, as the angel said to Mary, “...nothing will be impossible for God (1:37).

The painting of St. Dismas at San Quentin’s chapel was painted by a man on death row. He painted it in his tight cell using paint supplies purchased from his meager prison bank account

or given him by the chaplain. He used a towel draped over his stool to get a sense of the flow of garments over the arm or shoulder of his subject. He looked at his own image in the metal mirror over his wash basin and studied his hands so that he could render the details of the saint. The cell was too small to allow him to step back from his painting for perspective. Nevertheless, he painstakingly painted the criminal pardoned by Jesus during both their executions.

A death row inmate spending that much time, painting the smile on Dismas' face. I wonder what he was thinking as he painted that smile? I wonder if he heard the words once addressed to Dismas, now addressed to him on the Row at San Quentin?

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

THE CATHOLIC STUDY BIBLE, Edited by Donald Senior. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. Along with the scriptural text of "The New American Bible", this study bible has over 600 pages of study materials written by outstanding Catholic scriptural scholars. There are reading guides to each book as well as overviews of biblical genre, archaeological methods, a glossary and listings of the weekday and Sunday lectionaries.

QUOTABLE:

[Concerning the penitent thief] "This episode is recounted only in this gospel. The penitent sinner receives salvation through the crucified Jesus. Jesus' words to the penitent thief reveal Luke's understanding that the destiny of the Christian is 'to be with Jesus.'"

---THE CATHOLIC STUDY BIBLE, page 142

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. CD Available: "FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR C." The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and PDF) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer.

To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the "Year C-CD" button on the left and follow the instructions.

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (FrJude@JudeOP.org)

3. Our webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.)

4. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, [Click Here](#).

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Thank you and "Blessings on your preaching",
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