

THE CROSS DIVIDES BECAUSE IT DEMANDS A CHOICE

The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, is a reminder that the cross continues to be a sign of contradiction

Carl E. Olson

“Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?”

Those words were uttered in the mid-second century by St. Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna and one of the Apostolic Fathers. Polycarp was burned at the stake and pierced with a sword for refusing to burn incense to the Roman emperor. What did those who killed Polycarp think about his final words? Did they stop to wonder, “Who is this king he is willing to die for?” Or to ask, “Where is this king and his armies? Where is his kingdom?”

In *Quas Primas*, his 1925 encyclical that introduced the Feast of Christ the King, Pope Pius XI reflected on the nature of the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus Christ. His kingdom, the pontiff noted, “is spiritual and is concerned with spiritual things.” In proclaiming the kingdom of God, Jesus often had to strongly correct misunderstandings, especially from those who thought his rule would be based in political and military might, aimed at a violent overthrow of the Romans. When asked by Pilate, “Are you the king of the Jews?”, Jesus replied cryptically, indirectly: “You say so” (Lk. 23:3). He further explained, “My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight...” (Jn. 18:36).

“This kingdom is opposed to none other than to that of Satan and to the power of darkness,” Pius XI emphasized, “It demands of its subjects a spirit of detachment from riches and earthly things, and a spirit of gentleness. They must hunger and thirst after justice, and more than this, they must deny themselves and carry the cross.” It is the scandal and the paradox of the Cross that reveals the kingdom, just as making the sign of the cross reveals those who love and worship the king.

The cross is a sign of contradiction; it separates those who sneer, jeer, and revile Jesus from those who behold, embrace, and adore him. Execution on a cross was not only violent and grim, it was a shameful and dishonorable. Yet, as Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote, “His enthronement as King will be complete on the Cross ... And so he says, ‘Yes, I am a King.’ Not a king within a vanquished world but a King who sits on a throne exalted high above it. Exalted by the Cross.”

The cross divides mankind because it demands a choice, a judgment about the person of Jesus Christ. But having chosen the cross, the division ends and we are brought into union with the King and his divine life; we receive communion, partaking of his body and blood broken for us on the cross. The cross thus unites mankind, and the inner nature of the kingdom is revealed. As St. Paul wrote to the Colossians, in the Son “all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church.” The church is intimately related to the Kingdom: “*While it slowly grows,*

the Church strains toward the completed Kingdom and, with all its strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory with its King” (Lumen Gentium, 5).

The two criminals crucified with Christ personify the two options available to everyone. Both are sinners; both are able to look directly upon the King. But one sees only a fellow criminal—a target for angry, despairing mockery. Yet the other sees an innocent man; even more, he sees a King: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

The true meaning of Christ’s kingship, states the *Catechism*, “is revealed only when he is raised high on the cross” (par. 440). Yet many will reject the King, enthroning themselves as rulers of their passing lives. Others, such as Polycarp, give themselves completely to the King who never does any injury, but instead delivers us from the power of darkness and transfers us into his eternal kingdom.

Carl E. Olson editor@catholicworldreport.com

WHAT MAKES GOD GLAD?

Regis Martin

I don’t know. . .but I’ve been told. . .he finds us irresistible. (Marie Bellet) I keep hearing this music running through my head. And the words, sprung from a melody so fetching, so positively riveting, that I can’t seem to rid my mind of them. Nor do I want to because if they are true, if they correspond to reality, to something that actually happened, then everything changes.

The song is from an old soundtrack by Marie Bellet, a singer-songwriter of superb voice and wit, produced back in 2003, called *Lighten Up*. Of which the following two lines represent the refrain:

It was his delight to walk among men.

Heaven lend me light to see what he sees in them.

Two lines of heart-stopping beauty, what do they mean? And why won’t they go away? Because in the very lilt and simplicity of the song, the whole mystery of the Christian life stands revealed. And, thanks to the special alchemy of the artist, it ravishes the heart.

But, once again, what do the lines mean exactly? Only that God, who needs nothing from us – indeed, the sheer perfection of his being places him infinitely above any calculations of gain and loss – has freely chosen, against all the indices of good sense, to enter the human estate and actually become one of us.

God has done this, mind you, not merely out of pity for our brokenness, of which there is evidence enough to justify the most comprehensive divine coverage.

But out of pure delight, the prospect of our company having prompted him to come down out of heaven and pitch his tent in our midst. For the sheer pleasure, if you can believe it, of our company. What was he thinking? Is it anything we could possibly wrap our heads around?

What was he thinking? Is it anything we could possibly wrap our heads around?

But how could we? Unless we were God himself, there is simply no mechanism by which to parse whatever motive it was that drew him down into the muck and the mire of a fallen world. I mean, if you were God, would you do this? Could anything on planet earth possibly tempt you to take leave of the enticements of eternity?

Of course not. And isn't that comforting to know? Otherwise we might be tempted to think we were God. What a disaster that would be!

"If all things were within our grasp," warns Gregory of Nyssa, "the Higher Power would not be beyond us." And so, if this impossible thing were true, would it not follow that we'd all need huge cascading heaps of heavenly light just to see what on earth God sees in us? How apt the lesson, then, and that it should at once apply to all of us. Who else had Ms. Bellet in mind when writing the song?

And one more mediocre sinner

Wonderin' what to fix for dinner.

And I'll never know what's all the fuss,

What does he see in all of us?

Well, this much at least is clear. That whatever it is God sees in us he could hardly have come any closer in making his point. As Joseph Ratzinger reminded us in his *Introduction To Christianity*, a work that enjoys an almost iconic reputation among orthodox Catholic theologians:

God has come so near to us that we can kill him. . . . Thus today we stand somewhat baffled before this Christian "Revelation and wonder," especially when we compare it with the religiosity of Asia, whether it would not have been much simpler to believe in the Mysterious Eternal, entrusting ourselves to it in longing thought; whether God would not have done better, so to speak, to leave us at an infinite distance.

Simpler, yes, but scarcely as exciting. And certainly not nearly as consoling as the knowledge that it was never enough for God merely to have made us; and then, like some celestial clockmaker, leave us ticking away while he wanders off in search of something more interesting to do.

We may not be the star of the show, and so the parts we've been given to perform remain tangential at best to the action of the play. But why should that matter since it's God's play, after all, and the lines we've been asked to deliver were first written down by him? Then given a full-dress rehearsal by his Son.

Isn't that, after all, the whole point of the Incarnation? That in the human being Jesus we get to see and hear how our lines were meant to be spoken. It isn't only the face of God shining upon the countenance of Jesus that we are meant to see; it's also the face of man, the whole meaning of his being, that Christ came to reveal.

How wonderfully spot-on of Chesterton, then, in telling us that what he most likes about our God is that “he takes such an intense interest in his minor characters.”

So let’s put away the pious horror preventing our acceptance of the fact that God has truly assumed our human condition. How else will it shine like the noonday sun? Or, as the song says: *Lighten up*.

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