

True Kingship

Fr. Paul D. Scalia

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2024

What does it mean to be a king? That's at the heart of the conversation between Pontius Pilate and our Lord. (see John 18:33-37) Pilate stands there as a representative of the Roman Empire, possessing some kingly authority and wanting more, seeing **kingship as simply having power. For him, a king rules by force.** Jesus, on the other hand, stands as a prisoner: chained, beaten, ridiculed. He has no country, no army, no arms, no allies – no forces whatsoever. And yet He talks about His Kingdom.

Pilate, thinking one thing about kingship asks in disbelief, “Then you are a king?” Jesus, meaning another thing about kingship answers ambiguously: **“You say I am a king. . .” As if to say, “You mean one thing by that title. . .and I mean something else.”** Then He clarifies the something else: “For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” **He rules as King not by force of arms, not by intimidation or threats, but by the truth.**

A king's fundamental duty is to establish and keep order in his realm. But it makes all the difference how this is done. Pilate would do it by force, by simply imposing his will on those under him. His **order depends on threats and power.** Jesus, on the other hand, brings order by testifying to the truth. He, “the faithful witness” (Revelation 1:5), appeals to us to accept His Kingship of truth because He has first suffered for the truth.

In the preface for this feast, we hear His kingdom described as one of “justice, love, and peace.” Each of these depends on the

truth to which our Lord gives witness. **Without truth, there's no justice but only the domination of the strong over the weak. Without truth, there is no authentic love but only sentimentality. Without truth, there is no peace but only a truce with evil.**

His Kingdom is intensely personal. **First, because Jesus is truth itself.** We don't know the truth fully unless we know and are known by Him. But **it's personal also because He desires to bring order to our souls by ruling over us in the truth.** Not by imposing His will, not by threatening us into submission. **This King desires that His subjects be free. And His rule makes them freer. By looking to Him, we see that the truth really does bring interior peace, that kind of tranquility we all desire.**

Because we all know that **there is disorder within us. Our emotions war against one another, each one bidding for dominion. Anger, impatience, envy, lust, greed – these all try to claim kingship.** We don't do the good we desire but end up doing the evil we hate. We try to bring order by force of will. And we might be able to do so for a while. But that doesn't last, and we **ultimately realize that we need someone outside of us to set our house in order.**

So, to have Christ as King is, first, a personal reality: **it means allowing His truth to determine every aspect of our lives. The great temptation is to have Him as King, but only partially.** Maybe He can do it on a part-time basis. Maybe He can be a constitutional monarch, a figurehead whose importance we acknowledge, even as we do our own thing. **So, we cut Him out of certain areas of our lives: our finances, perhaps, or work, sexuality, friendships, entertainment, and so on. This ultimately means we still have a disordered life. It's just a compartmentalized disorder, so it looks nicer. . .for a time.**



Ecce Homo by Ignazio Jacometti, 1854. [Scala Santa (Holy Stairs), near the Archbasilica of Saint John Lateran, Rome]

Then there is the social dimension to His Kingship. It's significant that our Lord speaks of His kingship to a secular ruler, as if to confirm from the start that His Kingship has temporal effects. His Kingdom is not of this world, but it is in this world. "My kingdom is not here," He says. A better translation is **"My kingdom is not from here."** No, it doesn't depend on the forces of this world, but it's very much present in this world.

We're always tempted to privatize our religion, to acknowledge Christ as King in our personal lives only. We've done that so well that some have concluded we no longer need the right for the public exercise of religion; it's enough that we have it privately. **This feast was established precisely to proclaim that Christ the King should rule all of society, that only in His truth do human relations find their proper order and purpose. To confine his Kingship to the personal means to deny it.**

The public witness to his Kingship is no easy thing. After all, the standard for it is Jesus Christ standing unjustly condemned in front of Pontius Pilate. We find the means for doing so in today's post-Communion prayer, which speaks of "glorying in obedience."

Now, **we typically think of obedience in terms of suppression and obligation. But to obey Christ the King is a glorious thing. It admits Him into our souls to upend the dominion of the evil one, to govern our unruly passions, to establish His kingdom, and to make us truly free.**

That obedience in turn brings us before others, to give testimony as He did of the truth that sets us free.

© 2024 The Catholic Thing. All rights reserved. For reprint rights, write to:
info@frinstitute.org

The Catholic Thing is a forum for intelligent Catholic commentary.
Opinions expressed by writers are solely their own.