



Christ the King

The liturgical year is coming to a close and in the holy sacrifice of the altar we renew the offering of the victim to the Father — the offering of Christ, the king of justice, love and peace, as we shall read shortly in the preface. You all experience a great joy in your souls as you consider the sacred humanity of our Lord. He is a king with a heart of flesh, like yours; he is the author of the universe and of every creature, but he does not lord it over us. He begs us to give him a little love, as he silently shows us his wounds.

Why then do so many people not know him? Why do we still hear that cruel protest: "We do not want this man to reign over us"? There are millions of people in the world who reject Jesus Christ in this way; or rather they reject his shadow, for they do not know Christ. They have not seen the beauty of his face, they do not realize how wonderful his teaching is. This sad state of affairs makes me want to atone to our Lord. When I hear that endless clamour — expressed more in ignoble actions than in words — I feel the need to cry out, "He must reign!"

Many people will not accept that Christ should reign. They oppose him in thousands of ways: in their attitude toward their circumstances, in their approach to human society, in morality, in science and the arts. Even in the Church itself! "I am not referring," says St Augustine, "to those scoundrels who blaspheme against Christ with their tongues. There are very many who blaspheme against him through their own conduct."

Some people are even annoyed by the expression "Christ the king." They take naive objection to the word, as if Christ's kingship could be thought of in political terms. Or they refuse to admit that Christ is king, because that would involve accepting his law.

And law they will not accept, not even the wonderful precept of charity, for they do not want to reach out to God's love. Their ambition is to serve their own selfishness.

For many year now, our Lord has urged me to repeat a silent cry, Serviam: "I will serve!" Let us ask him to strengthen our desire to give ourselves, to be faithful to his calling — with naturalness, without fuss or noise — in the middle of everyday life. Let us thank him from the depth of our heart. We will pray to him as his subjects, as his sons! And our mouth will be filled with milk and honey. We will find great pleasure in speaking of the kingdom of God, a kingdom of freedom, a freedom he has won for us.

This Christ, whose birth we witnessed at Bethlehem, this adorable child, is the Lord of the universe. Let us meditate upon this fact. Everything in heaven and on earth was created by him. He has reconciled all things to the Father. He has re-established peace between heaven and earth, through the blood he shed on the cross. Today Christ is king, at the right hand of the Father. As the two angels in white robes said to the disciples who were gazing into heaven after our Lord's ascension: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Through him kings hold power, although kings — that is, human political authority — do not last. Yet the kingdom of Christ "will remain forever." "His is an everlasting dominion and his kingdom endures from generation to generation."

Christ's kingdom is not just a figure of speech. Christ is alive; he lives as a man, with the same body he took when he became man, when he rose after his death, the glorified body which subsists in the person of the Word together with his human heart. Christ, true God and true man, lives and reigns. He is the Lord of the universe. Everything that lives is kept in existence only through him. Why, then, does he not appear to us in all his glory? Because his kingdom is "not of this world," though it is in this world. Jesus replied to Pilate: "I am a king. For this I was born and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice." Those who expected the Messiah to have visible temporal power were mistaken. "The kingdom of God does not mean food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy

Spirit." Truth and justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. That is the kingdom of Christ: the divine activity which saves men and which will reach its culmination when history ends and the Lord comes from the heights of paradise finally to judge men.

When Christ began to preach on earth he did not put forward a political program. He said: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." He commissioned his disciples to proclaim this good news and he taught them to pray for the coming of the kingdom. The kingdom of God and his justice — a holy life: that is what we must first seek, that is the only thing really necessary.

The salvation which our Lord Jesus Christ preaches is an invitation which he addresses to every person: "A king gave a marriage feast for his son, and he sent his servants to call those who were invited to the marriage feast." Therefore, our Lord shows that "the kingdom of God is in the midst of you." No one is excluded from salvation, if he responds freely to the loving demands of Christ: to be born again; to become like children, in simplicity of spirit; to avoid everything which separates us from God. Jesus wants deeds, not just words. And he wants us to make a determined effort, because only those who fight will merit the eternal inheritance.

His kingdom will not achieve its perfection on earth. The definitive judgment of salvation or condemnation will not be made here. It is rather like sowing seed, like the growth of the grain of mustard seed. At its finish it will be like the net full of fish — they are all thrown out on the sand and sorted into those who led a just life and those who did evil. But as long as we live here the kingdom can be compared to yeast which a woman took and mixed with three measures of flour so that the whole batch was leavened.

Anyone who understands the kingdom Christ proposes, realizes that it is worth staking everything to obtain it. It is the pearl the merchant gets by selling all his property; it is the treasure found in the field. The kingdom of heaven is difficult to win. No one can be sure of achieving it, but the humble cry of a repentant man can open wide its doors. One of the thieves who was crucified with Jesus pleaded with him: "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Our Lord and our God: how great you are! It is you who give our life supernatural meaning and divine vitality. For love of your Son, you cause us to say with all our being, with our body and soul: "He must reign!" And this we do against the background of our weakness, for you know that we are creatures made of clay — and what creatures! Not just feet of clay, but heart and head too. Only through you can we live a divine life.

Christ should reign first and foremost in our soul. But how would we reply if he asked us: "How do you go about letting me reign in you?" I would reply that I need lots of his grace. Only that way can my every heartbeat and breath, my least intense look, my most ordinary word, my most basic feeling be transformed into a hosanna to Christ my king.

If we are trying to have Christ as our king we must be consistent. We must start by giving him our heart. Not to do that and still talk about the kingdom of Christ would be completely hollow. There would be no real christian substance in our behaviour. We would be making an outward show of a faith which simply did not exist. We would be misusing God's name to human advantage.

If Jesus' reign in my soul, in your soul, meant that he should find it a perfect dwelling place, then indeed would we have reason to despair. But "fear not, daughter of Sion; beloved, your king is coming, sitting on an ass' colt." Don't you see? Jesus makes do with a poor animal for a throne. I don't know about you; but I am not humiliated to acknowledge that in the Lord's eyes I am a beast of burden: "I am like a donkey in your presence, but I am continually with you. You hold my right hand," you take me by the bridle.

Try to remember what a donkey is like — now that so few of them are left. Not an old, stubborn, vicious one that would give you a kick when you least expected, but a young one with his ears up like antennae. He lives on a meagre diet, is hardworking and has a quick, cheerful trot. There are hundreds of animals more beautiful, more deft and strong. But it was a donkey Christ chose when he presented himself to the people as king in response to their acclamation. For Jesus has no time for calculations, for

astuteness, for the cruelty of cold hearts, for attractive but empty beauty. What he likes is the cheerfulness of a young heart, a simple step, a natural voice, clean eyes, attention to his affectionate word of advice. That is how he reigns in the soul.

If we let Christ reign in our soul, we will not become authoritarian. Rather we will serve everyone. How I like that word: service! To serve my king and, through him, all those who have been redeemed by his blood. I really wish we Christians knew how to serve, for only by serving can we know and love Christ and make him known and loved. And how will we show him to souls? By our example. Through our voluntary service of Jesus Christ, we should be witnesses to him in all our activities, for he is the Lord of our entire lives, the only and ultimate reason for our existence. Then, once we have given this witness of service, we will be able to give instruction by our word. That was how Christ acted. "He began to do and to teach;" he first taught by his action, and then by his divine preaching.

If we are to serve others, for Christ's sake, we need to be very human. If our life is less than human, God will not build anything on it, for he normally does not build on disorder, selfishness or emptiness. We have to understand everyone; we must live peaceably with everyone; we must forgive everyone. We shall not call injustice justice; we shall not say that an offence against God is not an offence against God, or that evil is good. When confronted by evil we shall not reply with another evil, but rather with sound doctrine and good actions: drowning evil in an abundance of good. That's how Christ will reign in our souls and in the souls of the people around us.

Some people try to build peace in the world without putting love of God into their own hearts. How could they possibly achieve peace in that way? The peace of Christ is the peace of the kingdom of Christ; and our Lord's kingdom has to be based on a desire for holiness, a humble readiness to receive grace, an effort to establish justice, a divine outpouring of love.

This can be done; it is not an empty dream. If only we men would decide to receive the love of God into our hearts! Christ our Lord was crucified; from the height of the cross he redeemed the world, thereby restoring peace between God and men. Jesus reminds

all of us: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all things to myself." If you put me at the centre of all earthly activities, he is saying, by fulfilling the duty of each moment, in what appears important and what appears unimportant, I will draw everything to myself. My kingdom among you will be a reality!

Christ our Lord still wants to save men and the whole of creation — this world of ours which is good, for so it came from God's hands. It was Adam's offence, the sin of human pride, which broke the divine harmony of creation. But God the Father, in the fullness of time, sent his only-begotten Son to take flesh in Mary ever Virgin, through the Holy Spirit, and re-establish peace. In this way, by redeeming man from sin, "we receive adoption as sons." We become capable of sharing the intimacy of God. In this way the new man, the new line of the children of God, is enabled to free the whole universe from disorder, restoring all things in Christ, as they have been reconciled with God.

That is the calling of Christians, that is our apostolic task, the desire which should consume our soul: to make this kingdom of Christ a reality, to eliminate hatred and cruelty, to spread throughout the earth the strong and soothing balm of love. Let us ask our king today to make us collaborate, humbly and fervently, in the divine task of mending what is broken, of saving what is lost, of fixing what man has put out of order, of bringing to his destination whoever has gone off the right road, of reconstructing the harmony of all created things.

Embracing the christian faith means committing oneself to continuing Jesus Christ's mission among men. We must, each of us, be alter Christus, ipse Christus: another Christ, Christ himself. Only in this way can we set about this great undertaking, this immense, unending task of sanctifying all temporal structures from within, bringing to them the leaven of redemption.

I never talk politics. I do not approve of committed Christians in the world forming a political-religious movement. That would be madness, even if it were motivated by a desire to spread the spirit of Christ in all the activities of men. What we have to do is put God in the heart of every single person, no matter who he is. Let us try to speak then in such a way that every Christian is able to bear witness to the faith he professes by

example and word in his own circumstances, which are determined alike by his place in the Church and in civil life, as well as by ongoing events.

By the very fact of being a man, a Christian has a full right to live in the world. If he lets Christ live and reign in his heart, he will feel — quite noticeably — the saving effectiveness of our Lord in everything he does. It does not matter what his occupation is, whether his social status is "high" or "low"; for what appears to us to be an important achievement can be very low in God's sight; and what we call low or modest can in christian terms be a summit of holiness and service.

When he does his work, a Christian is obliged not to side-step or play down the values that earthly things have in themselves. If the expression "bless all human activities" meant abusing or neglecting their intrinsic qualities I would never use such a phrase. Personally I have never been convinced that the ordinary activities of men should carry a placard or confessional label. Although I respect the opposite opinion, I feel that using such a label involves a risk of using the holy name of our faith in vain. And there is evidence of the label "catholic" being used to justify activities and behaviour which sometimes are not even decently human.

The world and all that it contains, except for sin, is good because it is made by God our Lord. Therefore, a Christian who fights continuously to avoid offending God — fighting in a positive way, out of love — has to devote himself to all earthly tasks, shoulder to shoulder with other citizens. He must defend all the values which derive from human dignity.

But there is one value which he must particularly cherish: personal freedom. Only if he defends the individual freedom of others — with the personal responsibility that must go with it — only then can he defend his own with human and christian integrity. I will keep on repeating that our Lord has gratuitously given us a great supernatural gift, divine grace, and another wonderful human gift, personal freedom. To avoid this degenerating into license, we must develop integrity, we must make a real effort to conform our behaviour to divine law, for where the Spirit is, there you find freedom.

The kingdom of Christ is a kingdom of freedom. In it the only slaves are those who freely bind themselves, out of love of God. What a blessed slavery of love, that sets us free! Without freedom, we cannot respond to grace. Without freedom, we cannot give ourselves freely to our Lord, for the most supernatural of reasons, because we want to.

Some of you listening to me have known me for a long time. You can bear out that I have spent my whole life preaching personal freedom, with personal responsibility. I have sought freedom throughout the world and I'm still looking for it, just like Diogenes trying to find an honest man. And every day I love it more. Of all the things on earth, I love it most. It is a treasure which we do not appreciate nearly enough.

When I talk about personal freedom, I am not using it as an excuse to discuss other very legitimate questions which are not of my competence as a priest. I know that it is not proper for me to discuss secular and current topics which belong to the temporal and civil sphere — subjects which our Lord has left to the free and calm discussion of men. I also know that a priest's lips must avoid all human, partisan controversy. He has to open them only to lead souls to God, to his saving doctrine and to the sacraments which Jesus Christ established, to the interior life which brings us closer to God, so that we see we are his children and therefore brothers to all men without exception.

We are celebrating today the feast of Christ the king. And I do not go outside my role as a priest when I say that if anyone saw Christ's kingdom in terms of a political program he would not have understood the supernatural purpose of the faith, and he would risk burdening consciences with weights which have nothing to do with Jesus, for his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Let us really love all men; let us love Christ above all; and then we cannot avoid loving the rightful freedom of others, living in harmony with them.

But perhaps you will say: "People do not want to hear this, much less put it into practice." I realize that. Freedom is a strong and healthy plant which does not grow well among stones and brambles or on the roadway, trodden under foot. We learned that long before Christ came to the earth.

Do you remember the second psalm? "Why do the nations conspire, and the people

plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves up and the rulers take council together, against the Lord and his anointed." You see: nothing new. People opposed Christ, the anointed, even before he was born. They opposed him as he went his peaceable way along the roads of Palestine; they persecuted him and continue to do so by attacking the members of his real and mystical body. Why so much hatred, why are people so easily taken in, why this universal smothering of the freedom of every conscience?

"Let us burst their bonds asunder and cast their yokes from us." They break the mild yoke, they throw off their burden, a wonderful burden of holiness and justice, of grace and love and peace. Love makes them angry; they laugh at the gentle goodness of a God who will not call his legions of angels to his help. If our Lord would only make a deal, if only he would sacrifice a few innocent people to satisfy a majority of blameworthy people, there might be a chance of arriving at some understanding with him. But that's not the way God thinks. Our Father is a real father, he's ready to forgive thousands of evildoers if there are even ten just men. People motivated by hatred cannot understand this mercy; they get more and more settled in their apparent earthly immunity, feeding on injustice.

"He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury." How righteous is God's anger, how just his ire, and how great his clemency!

"I have been set as a king by him on Sion, his holy mountain, to tell of his decrees. The Lord said to me, You are my son, today I have begotten you." The kindness of God our Father has given us his Son for a king. When he threatens he becomes tender, when he says he is angry he gives us his love. "You are my son": this is addressed to Christ — and to you and me if we decide to become another Christ, Christ himself.

Words cannot go so far as the heart, which is moved by God's goodness. He says to us: "You are my son." Not a stranger, not a well-treated servant, not a friend — that would be a lot already. A son! He gives us free access to treat him as sons, with a son's

piety and I would even say with the boldness and daring of a son whose Father cannot deny him anything

True, many people are bent on injustice. But the Lord insists: "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." That is a strong promise, and it's God who makes it. We cannot tone it down. Not for nothing is Christ the redeemer of the world; he rules as sovereign, at the right hand of the Father. It is a terrifying announcement of what awaits each man when life is over — for over it will be. When history comes to an end, it will be the lot of all those whose hearts have been hardened by evil and despair.

But God, although he can conquer, prefers to convince people: "Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, o rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, with trembling kiss his feet, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way; for his wrath is quickly kindled." Christ is the Lord, the king. "And this is the message we preach to you; there was a promise made to our forefathers, and this promise God has redeemed for our posterity, by raising Jesus to life. Thus, it is written in the second psalm, You are my son, I have begotten you this day... Here is news for you, then, brethren; remission of your sins is offered to you through him. There are claims from which you could not be acquitted by the law of Moses, and whoever believes in Jesus is quit of all these. Beware, then, of incurring the prophets' rebuke: Look upon this, you scornful souls, and lose yourselves in astonishment. Such wonders I am doing in your days, that if a man told you the story you would not believe him."

This deed is the working of salvation, the kingdom of Christ in souls, the manifestation of the mercy of God. "Blessed are they who take refuge in him." We Christians have the right to proclaim the royalty of Christ. Although injustice abounds, although many do not desire the kingdom of love, the work of salvation is taking place in the same human history that harbours evil.

"I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of affliction." Let us be men of peace, men of justice, doers of good, and our Lord will not

be our judge, but our friend, our brother, our love.

On our happy way through the world we enjoy the company of the angels of God. "Before the birth of our redeemer," St Gregory the Great writes, "we had lost the friendship of the angels. Original sin and our daily sins had kept us away from their bright purity... But ever since the moment we acknowledged our king, the angels have recognized us as their fellow citizens.

"And seeing that the king of heaven wished to take on our earthly flesh, the angels no longer shun our misery. They do not dare consider as inferior to their own this nature which they adore in the person of the king of heaven; there it is, raised up above them; they have now no difficulty in regarding man as a companion."

Mary, the holy Mother of our king, the queen of our heart, looks after us as only she knows how. Mother of mercy, throne of grace: we ask you to help us compose, verse by verse, the simple poem of charity in our own life and the lives of the people around us; it is "like a river of peace." For you are a sea of inexhaustible mercy: "All streams run to the sea, but the sea is never full."

St Josemaria Escriva, Christ Is Passing By, "Christ the King"

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