

CHRIST THE KING (LAST AFTER PENTECOST) – 2021

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

Amen.

There is a great similarity in two of our readings today, one from the Book of Daniel in Hebrew Scripture, and the other from the Book of Revelation at the end of the New Testament. Both of them are trying to describe the throne room of heaven, a gathering of thousands to attend to, to wait upon the Ancient One, the Almighty. All of the symbols and descriptions are of splendor and grandeur, of majesty and power, and out of the Ancient One's very presence a stream of fire flowed. In Revelation this figure is described a bit differently, not as simply having an origin in the distant past of history, but rather the One "who is and who was and who is to come," the One who indwells this world simultaneously throughout time and in all places. In Daniel, One who has the form of a human is presented to this splendid Being, the Ancient One. In Hebrew Scripture, this is one of the prophecies of the Messiah, the Anointed One, who is to have dominion and kingship that will never be destroyed. Remember: that word "dominion" is very powerful. To "have dominion" over something or someone is to be like God to it or to them. When God gives someone "dominion," God does not give that person a power to control. God gives the capacity to love what the person is given with all his heart, with all his mind and with all his strength. The Messiah was to have that gift of dominion over Israel, as revealed in Jewish prophetic literature. So here the author of Daniel is describing to us the transmission of that all-powerful gift; it is the empowerment of the One who is to come, a vision and a prophecy of what God has in store not only for Israel, but for the whole world.

In Revelation, the author writes about 60 years after the death of Jesus, writing as one who has accepted Jesus as this promised Messiah. He is described in three ways: 1) he is the faithful witness, the one who testifies to what is true in the heart of God, and who is himself faithful to that revelation of God's heart; 2) he is the firstborn of the dead, the one whose death was not the end but a new beginning, a raising up to something new, with a power to bring grace to all who would open their hearts to receive it; 3) he is the ruler of the kings of the earth, which I do not think refers to an earthly kingship over nations and lands, with the local rulers as his subjects; I think it is better described in the last hymn we sing today, "In your hearts enthrone him, there let him subdue all that is not holy, all that is not true. Crown him as your Captain in temptation's hour; Let his will enfold you with its grace and power." That's a spiritual reference which claims an allegiance to Jesus that transcends any other allegiances we may have. It does not wipe them out; we are allowed other allegiances, in fact, for the world to be healthy, we need to have more allegiances, more bonds of fellowship and partnership between us but they are all to be seen as transformed by the grace of our allegiance to Christ the King, transformed and purified, made whole and made holy. The author of Revelation says that it is this kingship that is never to be destroyed.

From the time of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness to the day of his crucifixion Jesus was struggling to understand this. He knew that he had a powerful relationship with God. He trusted that relationship as true. He knew God as Abba, the intimate term for Father, yet like us, Jesus was on a journey deeper and deeper into God's heart. He was learning how to be Jesus, how to be who he was, how to be himself. And if he were truly the promised Messiah, he had to learn what that Messiah was really to be about. The common perception was that the Messiah would be a leader with military skills who would lead Israel

into glory by overcoming and destroying their enemies, overwhelming those enemies with power and strength. The prophecy was such that if Messiah were successful with this, the people of Israel would follow him anywhere.

In his temptations Jesus caught a glimpse of this, realizing that if he succumbed to the temptation of turning stones into bread he could fill people's stomachs and give them the assurance of safety and well-being. He also realized that by doing this for people he would be enslaving their minds and hearts, literally forcing them to follow him anywhere for their survival. Jesus saw early on that to enslave us was to turn us back into infants. He learned that the only way he could lead was to invite us human beings in this world, in generation after generation and no matter what our culture, to invite us to keep choosing to be true to who we are and to what God is calling us to become. That means waking every day to choices, between good and evil, between love and hate, between truth and falsehood, between so much more that is involved in our daily choices between life and death.

Living with countless choices may sound simple and easy on the surface, but it is the most difficult thing we do in life, and we never do it once and for all, for we are making the choices that make us who we are every day.

Our gospel passage takes us into the heart of Jesus as Pilate's questions open Jesus up to describe what he believes. It is a multi-layered conversation, and as much as Pilate never seems to really get what Jesus is talking about, we, too, have to spend a great deal of time pondering over this and coming back to it again and again on our spiritual journey. The point isn't to "get it" once and for all, the point is to ponder until some gleam of insight comes through to help us on our life's journey, and then to follow that as long as it gives us light. And

then we ponder again as life raises new and bigger questions for us and we need more light to live by. And so we go on and on, finding light because we see Jesus looking for and always finding and following the light. Because of that we proclaim that Jesus is the light.

Right now, our world is going through a very widespread battle between light and darkness. We see it in the many ugly instances of racist thinking and behavior that surround us, and its parallel, the phobia of any and all people who are not like us and therefore to be shunned, at least, perhaps killed. We see this battle going on in the will of people to act as vigilantes and take the law out of the hands of the police into their own. We see it in the many ways, in country after country, that there are movements to control people, to keep them from participating in voting, in governing, rather than educate them and help them to grow. I think we are in a very dangerous place, not just in our country, but worldwide. This is not the kingship of Jesus we are seeing in so many places surrounding us near and far. Oh, the adherents of one cause or another, of one side or another, may be wearing crosses around their necks, but that is not the cross of Christ. Those crosses are merely jewelry, and jewelry that gives a false sign of where that person's heart is. It is not with Jesus. When we see someone hell-bent to diminish others, to bring harm to others, to kill others, when their goal is destruction, that is not the way of the cross; that is the way of evil and separation and division. Jesus had no part in that.

In all this time of division and divisiveness, I hear some people wanting to sit on the sidelines, or go into their homes and hide, to avoid the conflicts, to keep out of harm's way. A few months ago, I quoted the great Italian poet Dante who wrote "The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in the time of great moral crisis, do nothing." I don't believe in such an eternal place, but his sentiment rings true, for

if we do nothing in the face of evil, if we do not speak up and speak out, then when great destruction comes, we shall suffer not only the pains of that destruction but the shame of our cowardice in the face of it. That's to look death in the face twice, the death of our body and the death of our soul.

There is a great battle going on right now for the soul of humanity. It is usually more subtle than what we now experience, but it has come to the fore in our lifetime. Jesus' kingship is not about winning battles or wars; it is about winning hearts. Jesus' way is not the way of power and force; it is the way of invitation and persuasion. One of the biggest temptations we have right now is to do evil to fight evil. It is as if we could find a way to do just a little bit of evil in order to root out a lot of evil. It doesn't work that way. When we lose sight of the good, we cannot move toward it, and the good always has to do with more life, with more love, with more grace, not less. It is only in love that we can stand, and we stand together because it is love that holds us up.

I want to quote again a line from our wonderful hymn today about the real kingship of Jesus: "In your hearts enthrone him, there let him subdue all that is not holy, all that is not true. Crown him as your Captain, in temptation's hour; let his will enfold you with its grace and power. *Amen.*

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