

Solemnity of Christ The King - A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

Instituted by Pius XI in 1926, this feast was celebrated on the last Sunday of October to foster the awareness of Christ's dominion over all people and to establish peace among nations. After Vatican Council II the feast was transferred to the last Sunday of the Liturgical Year, the Sunday before Advent, on which the human race is consecrated to the Sacred Heart through the Litany of the Sacred Heart and a prayer recited before the Blessed Sacrament.

This feast celebrates Christ's Kingship in an altogether non-worldly way. Jesus was anointed by the Father with the oil of gladness as the Eternal Priest and Universal King. As Priest He offered His life on the altar of the Cross and redeemed the human race by this one perfect sacrifice of peace. As King He claims dominion over all creation that He may present to the almighty Father a Kingdom of truth and life, a Kingdom of holiness and grace, a Kingdom of justice, love, and peace.

1st Reading - Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17

It is Ezekiel who pronounces the death sentence upon the kingdom with its entire political and religious structure of king, priest, and prophet. The earliest date mentioned in his book is 593 B.C. and the latest is 571 B.C. He was one of those deported by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon in 597 B.C.

The book of Ezekiel falls into four major parts:

- 1) Chapters 1 through 24 which are threatening discourses before the fall of Jerusalem;
- 2) Chapters 25 through 32 which are oracles against the nations;
- 3) Chapters 33 through 39 which contain discourses of promise after the fall of Jerusalem (from which our reading for today comes); and
- 4) Chapters 40 through 48 which are descriptions of the future restoration of the Temple, Jerusalem, and Israel.

It is interesting that St. Jerome, in his preface to the book of Ezekiel notes that rabbinic tradition was that no one was permitted to read the beginning and the end of the book (also the beginning of Genesis and all of the Song of Songs) until he reached the age at which priests began their ministry (age 30) because “full maturity of human nature is necessary for perfect knowledge and mystical understanding” such as are called for by the material in these passages.

The ten verses preceding today's reading are a bitter indictment of the wicked shepherds of

God's people. In today's reading we hear Yahweh proclaim that he will judge between the sheep and inaugurate an age of peace.

¹¹ For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will look after and tend my sheep.

Since the kings, priests, and prophets have been ineffective, and even led to denial of God, there will be a return to the theocracy, God will be in control. Biblical tradition sees God as Israel's shepherd (Psalm 23; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 31:10).

¹² As a shepherd tends his flock when he finds himself among his scattered sheep, so will I tend my sheep. I will rescue them from every place where they were scattered when it was cloudy and dark. ¹⁵ I myself will pasture my sheep; I myself will give them rest, says the Lord GOD. ¹⁶ The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal

God will reverse the evil done by bad human shepherds.

(but the sleek and the strong I will destroy), shepherding them rightly.

Those who would lead the others astray by setting bad example or rebellion. God is a good provider, defender of justice and upholder of the weak.

¹⁷ As for you, my sheep, says the Lord GOD, I will judge between one sheep and another, between rams and goats.

This is an application of the principle of individual responsibility.

2nd Reading - 1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28

In Paul's day Corinth was a bustling city with a cosmopolitan population drawn from all parts of the Roman Empire. It was a center of government and of commerce; its population included Roman officials and military, businessmen, merchants, and sailors from Greece, Italy, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and other parts of the empire. The city was also famous as a sports center. It was the home of the Isthmian games celebrated every second spring. Athletes from all of Greece and the empire flocked to Corinth to compete in these contests. In a pagan world notoriously tolerant of sexual license, Corinth had a reputation for debauchery and licentiousness. In the Greek language, "to live like a Corinthian" meant to live a dissolute life. Also, the expression "Corinthian girl" was a euphemism for a prostitute. The patron deity of the city was Aphrodite, whose temple is said to have been serviced by a thousand priestesses, who were sacred prostitutes.

Against this background, Saint Paul established the Church in Corinth in early A.D. 51 and eighteen months later left there a flourishing community of Jewish and Gentile converts.

This letter to the Corinthians is the second of four, two having been lost. In it Paul addresses disorders in the Church and provides answers to questions they have posed to him in a letter.

²⁰ But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Firstfruits is more than first in time. It is a Jewish cultic term. The offering of the first fruits was the symbol of the dedication of the entire harvest to God. The resurrection of all who are in Him.

“Paul says this in order to get at the false prophets who claimed that Christ was never born and thus cannot have died. The resurrection from the dead proves that Christ was a man and therefore able to merit by His righteousness the resurrection of the dead.” [The Ambrosiaster (between A.D. 366-384), *Commentaries on Thirteen Pauline Epistles* 1 Corinthians 15:20]

²¹ For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead came also through a human being.

“The very human nature which was cast down must itself also gain the victory. For it was by this means that the reproach was wiped away.” [Saint John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 392), *Homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 39,5]

²² For just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life,

The parallelism between Christ and Adam is a favorite Pauline teaching.

²³ but each one in proper order: Christ the firstfruits; then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ; ²⁴ then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to his God and Father, when he has destroyed every sovereignty and every authority and power.

The consummation of time when Christ, having completed His redemptive mission and brought all the elect to the glory of His resurrection, manifests His total victory over the evil spirits. Then, having completed His work, He hands over to His Father the royal authority that was conferred on Him as Savior of the world and Head of the Church.

²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.

See the messianic psalm, Psalm 110:1; a psalm sung by the pilgrims as they journeyed to Jerusalem for the Passover.

“Will the Lord rule only until He has put all His enemies under His feet? Will He then stop ruling? Obviously it is only then that He will really begin to rule in the full sense of the word! [Saint Jerome (ca. A.D. 383), *Against Helvidius: The Perpetual Virginity of the Blessed Virgin Mary* 6]

²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁸ When everything is subjected to him, then the Son himself will (also) be subjected to the one who subjected everything to him, so that God may be all in all.

Gospel - Matthew 25:31-46

This parable has no parallel in the other Gospels, it is unique to Matthew. It follows

immediately after the parable of the talents which we heard last week.

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory,

Son of Man is a title which only Jesus uses for Himself. It recalls the vision of Daniel 7:9, 13-14. Here, the Son of Man acts in the place of God.

and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne,³² and all the nations will be assembled before him.

It is God who will do the gathering.

And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

³³ He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

The separation of the sheep from the goats can be observed in Palestine today. The sheep and goats are pastured together but are separated when it is time for them to be moved.

³⁴ Then the king will say

The Son of Man as king, is executing His Father's will. With a blessing He invites the saved to enter the kingdom, which always exists but which we enter when He decides to bring it and admit us to it.

to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.'

This lists six of the seven corporal works of mercy: gave me food, gave me drink, clothed me, welcomed me, comforted me, visited me. The missing virtue is to bury the dead.

³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?'

The "just" show surprise. They did these things because they wanted to, not because they were trying to buy God off or force His hand.

⁴⁰ And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.'

Service of the needy is identified with the love of Christ. A "least brother" is not necessarily a member of the Christian community, but any human being.

⁴¹ Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was

thirsty and you gave me no drink,⁴³ a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.' ⁴⁴ Then they will answer and say, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?' ⁴⁵ He will answer them, 'Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.'

These have failed to observe God's family covenant. They have failed to care for their brothers.

⁴⁶ And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

See Daniel 12:2.