

Solemnity of Christ the King, C – November 24, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 700 words

The scene of the crucifixion prefigures the scene of the final judgment.¹ Recall that the gospel of Matthew tells us that at the end of time Christ will return glorious and the good and the bad shall be separated² – the “sheep” on one side and the “goats” on the other. So also at the crucifixion, we see Christ the Lord in the center and the good and the bad on either side; one thief is saved, the other is not. All three men were hanging there condemned by worldly power – but God had the final word. Though worldly power had drawn a line, condemning in a final way, we see how prayer was able to go beyond the world’s power.

“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”, the thief pleaded. Jesus replied, “Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise”. The kingdom of Christ is not of this world – and no power in this world can control who enters it and who does not; only Jesus has that authority. The great Archbishop Fulton Sheen will be declared a Blessed next month; he commented beautifully on this passage many years ago. He said, “A dying man asked a dying man for eternal life; a man without possessions asked a poor man for a Kingdom; a thief at the door of death asked to die like a thief and steal Paradise”.³

The holy archbishop continued, “One would have thought a saint would have been the first soul” to enter heaven, “...but in the Divine plan it was a thief who was the escort of the King of kings into Paradise”.⁴ This is all astonishing! Our Lord is there offering his life to the Father for the salvation of the world, and a man who effectively has a deathbed conversion is the first we know of to benefit from Christ’s salvific work. Not someone who had served God faithfully over many years; no, someone who just barely made it, who waited seemingly beyond the eleventh hour, yet still found a chance. How great God’s mercy is!

But this same scene teaches us that we may not presume upon that mercy – for there was also the other thief, who never found a chance to repent. He remained in his scorn and mockery – in contempt. How hard, how blind the human heart can become! The mystery of human freedom and the mystery of iniquity intersect in the heart. We have far greater security if we serve God with all our hearts now, than if we delay for some future opportunity – but perhaps never find it. The story of the bad thief is the ultimate tragedy, for it has no silver lining. Recall the words of Christ at the last judgment: “Depart from me”.⁵

Through baptism we have been “delivered... from the power of darkness and transferred... to the kingdom of [God’s] beloved Son”, as St. Paul said in the second reading. Many times, however, we have renounced our citizenship in that kingdom through sin – but hopefully many times, our good standing has been restored through confession. It comes back to worldly versus divine power: whom will we serve? It is often an either/or matter; remember the last words of St. Thomas More: “I am the king’s good servant – but God’s first”. If Christ and his kingdom are not first in our lives, we should question whether we really deserve to end up there in a final way!

In another gospel passage Christ said, “See first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all will be given to you besides”.⁶ On this Solemnity of Christ the King, let us examine our priorities. Is Christ really first in my life? Could others claim that about me? Do I live each day under the aspect of eternity, or do I, rather, have a more worldly outlook? We are about to enter a very materialistic time of the year – how essential that we keep a spiritual focus; the season of Advent is meant to assist us with that. Christ came some 2,000 years ago and will certainly come again. “Jesus, remember me... in your kingdom”. May I be found ready, Lord!

¹ Cf. Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, *Life of Christ* (London: Peter Davies, 1958), p. 442.

² See Matthew 25:31-46.

³ Sheen, p. 443.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Matthew 25:41.

⁶ Matthew 6:33.