



SUNDAY REFLECTION

A theme running through all of today's readings is that of witness. The prophet Malachi testifies to the forthcoming arrival of the Day of the Lord. Paul corroborates his teaching with the testimony of his actions. Jesus tells the disciples that their sufferings for His sake are the opportunity for them to render testimony. All the disciples, not just the apostles, are called to be Jesus's witnesses. Being a follower of Jesus involves not simply benefitting from His life and work and assenting to His teaching, but also actively being a witness to Him and not merely in words but also, and particularly, by attitudes and actions. The Greek word 'martyr' means witness. It may be that not all Christians are called to shed their blood because of their faith but all are called to testify to Jesus.

Witnessing to Jesus does not merely come before the 'end', also contributes to the arrival of the end. The Day of the Lord is not an event which occurs from outside but one which comes from within the world as the result of testifying by Jesus's disciples. By their attitudes and

actions, inspired by Jesus's teaching and example, Christians bring the world to perfection. Persevering in this work brings them and creation to fulfillment, a condition which transcends material splendor just as human lives excel the material splendor of the Jerusalem Temple. The disciples, and, therefore, all Christians are called to continue Jesus's prophetic work of salvation (Lk. 4:18), indeed to perfect His work.

More precisely, Jesus will accomplish His work in, through and by them; they are His agents, not simply waiting the temporal end of creation but actually bringing it about, in the sense of accomplishing its purpose, still through suffering opposition, persecution and death. As the French philosopher put it, 'Christ is in agony until the end of time'. Christians are not simply to refer back to Jesus's teaching and work, any more than they should speculate about how and when the world will end temporally but concentrate on being His agents into the indefinite future by propagating the good news, especially by a way of life inspired by its values. They are to imitate their teacher, just as Paul in the Second Reading exhorted his readers to imitate him. Being Jesus's disciple involves living and working as He did, inspired by His attitude, In this way, Jesus's work becomes diversified, applied universally throughout the world, reaching and affecting the whole of humanity and indeed the whole of creation. Each one of us might examine our lives to discern precisely how we, in our individual and unique circumstances and with our own un-transferable, irreplaceable abilities, can do this work.

STEWARDSHIP: Today's readings paint a somewhat frightening picture of the end of time. But the Gospel ends with the assurance to faithful stewards that those who persevere will be saved.

Second Vatican Council *"The Church Today"*

For God has called man and still calls him so that with his entire being he might be joined to Him in an endless sharing of a divine life beyond all corruption. Christ won this victory when He rose to life, since by His death He freed man from death. Hence to every thoughtful man a solidly established faith provides the answer to his anxiety about what the future holds for him.

READINGS FOR SOLEMNITY of Christ the KING

24 NOV '19

2 Sam. 5:1-3: David is anointed king of Israel, in succession to Saul.

Col. 1:12-20: Paul reminds his readers that they have been introduced to the kingdom of God's beloved Son, who is image of the invisible God.

Lk. 23:35-43: The crucified Jesus forgives the repentant criminal, promising that he will be with Him that day in Paradise.

Paul W. Harrison

"Wherever God rules over the human heart as King, there is the Kingdom of God established."

PURGATORY:

Vatican II's *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* asserted, "This sacred council accepts loyally the venerable faith of our ancestors in the living communion which exists between us and our brothers who are in the glory of heaven or who are yet being purified after their death; and it proposes again the decrees of the Second Council of Nicaea, of the Council of Florence, and of

the Council of Trent" (#51). Moreover, the *Catechism* clearly affirms the Church's belief in purgatory and the purification of the soul after death (cf. #1030-32).

As Vatican II stated, the Church has consistently believed in a purification of the soul after death. This belief is rooted in the Old Testament. In the Second Book of Maccabees, we read of how Judas Maccabees offered sacrifices and prayers for soldiers who had died wearing amulets, which were forbidden by the Law; Scripture reads, "Turning to supplication, they prayed that the sinful deed might be fully blotted out" (12:43) and "Thus, [Judas Maccabees] made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from the sin" (12:46). This passage gives evidence of the Jewish practice of offering prayers and sacrifices to cleanse the soul of the departed. Rabbinic interpretation of Scripture also attests to the belief. In the Book of the Prophet Zechariah, the Lord spoke, "I will bring the one third through fire, and I will refine them as silver is refined, and I will test them as gold is tested" (13:9); the School of Rabbi Shammai interpreted this passage as a purification of the soul through God's mercy and goodness, preparing it for eternal life. A similar passage is found in Wisdom 3:1-12. In Sirach 7:33, "Withhold not your kindness from the dead" was interpreted as imploring God to cleanse the soul. In sum, the Old Testament clearly attests to some kind of purification process of the soul of the faithful after death.

The New Testament has few references about a purging of the soul or even about heaven for that matter. Rather the focus is on preaching the gospel and awaiting the second coming of Christ, which only later did the writers of Sacred Scripture realize could be after their own deaths. However, in Matthew 12:32, Jesus' statement that certain sins "will not be forgiven either in this world or in the world to come," at least suggests a purging of the soul after death. Pope St. Gregory (d. 604) stated, "As for certain lesser faults, we must believe that, before the Final Judgment, there is a purifying fire. He who is truth says that whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age nor in the age to come. From this sentence we understand that certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come." The Council of Lyons (1274) likewise affirmed this interpretation of our Lord's teaching.

The early Church preserved the belief in offering prayers for the purification of the soul. Pope St. Gregory said, "Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them." St. Ambrose (d. 397) preached, "We have loved them during life; let us not abandon them in death, until we have conducted them by our prayers into the house of the Lord." Moreover, the Church has affirmed this belief many times, as Vatican II stated.

The key to this answer, however, is to see the beauty behind the doctrine of purgatory. We believe that God gave us a free will so that we could choose between right and wrong, good and evil. Our free will allows us to make the one fundamental choice— to love God. An act of the free will also entails responsibility. When we choose not to love God and thereby sin, we are responsible for that sin. God in His justice holds us accountable for such sins, but in His love and mercy desires us to be reconciled to Himself and our neighbor. During our life on this earth, if we really love God, we examine our consciences, admit our sins, express contrition for them, confess them, and receive absolution for them in the Sacrament of Penance. We perform penances and other sacrifices to heal the hurt caused by sin. In so doing, we are continually saying "yes" to the Lord. In a sense our soul is like a lens— when we sin, we cloud the lens; it gets dirty, and we lose the focus of God in our lives. Through confession and

penance, God cleanses the “lens” of our soul. When we die, if we leave this life fundamentally loving God, dying in His grace and friendship, and free of mortal sin, we will have eternal salvation and attain the beatific vision— we will see God for who He is. If we die with venial sins or without having done sufficient penance for our sins, God in His love, mercy, and justice will not only hold us accountable for our sins but also purify our souls, “cleanse the lens” so to speak. After such purification, the soul will then be united with God in heaven and enjoy the beatific vision.

Protestants have difficulty with the doctrine of Purgatory for basically two reasons: First, when Martin Luther translated the Bible into German in 1532, he removed seven books of the Old Testament, including the two Books of Maccabees, Sirach, and Wisdom, where at least implicitly the purification of the soul is found. Second, John Calvin preached that we had lost our free will due to original sin and that God had predetermined whether a soul was saved or damned; therefore, if we cannot choose to sin and if our eternal destiny is predetermined, who needs a purgatory? In all, the Protestant leaders cast aside centuries of Christian Church teaching when they denied the doctrine of purgatory.

In *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul II related God’s “living flame of Love” spoken of by St. John of the Cross with the doctrine of purgatory: “The ‘living flame of love,’ of which St. John speaks, is above all a purifying fire. The mystical nights described by this great Doctor of the Church on the basis of his own experience corresponds, in a certain sense, to purgatory. God makes man pass through such an interior purgatory of his sensual and spiritual nature in order to bring him into union with Himself. Here we do not find ourselves before a mere tribunal. We present ourselves before the power of love itself. Before all else, it is Love that judges. God, who is Love, judges through love. It is love that demands purification, before man can be made ready for that union with God which is his ultimate vocation and destiny.”

FEAST OF CHRIST THE KING:

Next Sunday we celebrate the feast of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe. This is a relatively new feast on the Church’s calendar but it has old antecedents.

History of the Title

The tradition of calling Christ “King” is ancient in origin.

The earliest Christians identified Jesus with the predicted Messiah of the Jews. The Jewish word "messiah," and the Greek word "Christ," both mean "anointed one," and came to refer to the expected king who would deliver Israel from the hands of the Romans. Christians believe that Jesus is this expected Messiah. Unlike the messiah most Jews expected, Jesus came to free all people, Jew and Gentile, and He did not come to free them from the Romans, but from sin and death. Thus the king of the Jews, and of the cosmos, does not rule over a kingdom of this world.

Jesus is referred to as King throughout the New Testament:

“To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and Ever. Amen.” 1 Tim 1:17

Nathan’a-el answered Him, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jn. 1:49

Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked Him, “Are You the King Of the Jews?” Jesus said, “You have said so.” Mt. 27:11

And this will be made manifest at the proper time by the blessed and only Sovereign, The King of kings and Lord of lords 1 Tim 6:15

And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb Saying, “Great and wonderful are thy deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and True are Thy ways, O King of the ages!” Rev. 15-3

And from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler Of kings on earth. To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood. Rev. 1:5

On His robe and on His thigh He has a name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords. Rev. 19:16

Clearly “King” was one of the earliest titles given to the Son of God. The title does not refer to a status of an earthly king, which many of the Jews had been expecting – someone to overthrow the Roman rule and be earthly king of Israel. Rather He came to be the spiritual king; His kingdom is in heaven, not confined to the earth alone. In respecting the name of Christ the King, and in celebrating the yearly feast, both citizens and leaders are to remain reverent and devoted to the higher authority of Christ.

Origin of the Feast

When the world was in turmoil and the increasing growth of secularism was spreading throughout the world, Pope Pius XI sought to combat it with an affirmation that Jesus Christ is the true king to whom we owe allegiance.

He did this by establishing a feast in honor of “Our Lord Jesus Christ the King” in 1925, through his encyclical letter *Quas Primas*. Pius XI explained, “WE firmly hope ... that the feast of the Kingship of Christ, which in future will be yearly observed, may hasten the return of society to our loving Savior.”

Initially this feast was celebrated on the last Sunday of October, immediately preceding the feast of All Saints Day on November 1. This was a deliberate choice and Pius XI explains why he chose that date.

The last Sunday of October seemed the most convenient of all for this purpose, because it is at the end of the liturgical year, and thus the feast of the Kingship of Christ sets the crowning glory upon the mysteries of the life of Christ already commemorated during the year, and, before celebrating the triumph of all the Saints, we proclaim and extol the glory of him who triumphs in all the Saints and in all the Elect. Make it your duty and your task, Venerable Brethren, to see that sermons are preached to the people in every parish to teach them the meaning and the

importance of this feast, that they may so order their lives as to be worthy of faithful and obedient subjects of the Divine King.

In this way Pius XI was linking our quest for holiness to the kingship of Christ.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* highlights this connection when commenting on our participation in the kingly office of Jesus Christ.

The People of God shares in the royal office of Christ. He exercises His kingship by drawing all men to Himself through his death and Resurrection. Christ, King and Lord of the universe, made Himself the servant of all, for He came “not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” For the Christian, “to reign is to serve Him,” particularly when serving “the poor and the suffering, in whom the Church recognizes the image of her poor and suffering founder.”

The People of God fulfills its royal dignity by a life in keeping with its vocation to serve with Christ. (CCC 786)

We participate in that kingship when we serve others and order our lives according to the Gospel. The saints in Heaven were successful in that regard and were true servants of the King, pouring out His love to all those in the world.

While this feast was later moved to the end of November to heighten its connection to the end of the liturgical year, this spiritual theme still retains its power and reminds us what it means to be obedient servants of a benevolent King.

We will inherit the joys of the Kingdom only when we recognize our role as faithful servants, ready and willing to do whatever it takes to bring about a reign of love that covers the whole world.

SAINT OF THE WEEK NERSES THE GREAT 333-373 19 NOV

Bishop and martyr, the father of St. Isaac the Great. A native of Armenia, he studied in Cappadocia and wed a princess who gave birth to Isaac. After she died, he served as a chamberlain in the court of King Arshak of Armenia (fourth century). In 353 he was made Catholicos (Katholikos) of the Armenians. Nerses devoted much effort to reforming the Armenian Church, including convening a synod in 365 based on the principles he had studied under St. Basil at Caesarea. Though he established hospitals and monasteries, his reforms and denunciation of King Arshak's murder of the queen led to his exile. He returned after Arshak's death in battle, but relations were not much better with the new Armenian ruler, Pap, whose dissolute lifestyle caused Nerses to refuse him admission into church. Nerses was invited to a royal banquet at Khakh, on the Euphrates River, and was assassinated by poison.