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The Solemnity of Christ the King (C)

The Scriptural account the repentant thief, whom tradition names Dismas, seems quite out of place as we celebrate the Solemnity of Christ the King. This Jesus, condemned and executed as a common criminal, hardly seems worthy of kingship. The image of Jesus hanging between two thieves resembles nothing of the majesty of a monarch, as we commonly know it.

Where is the glory and the majesty of the king? Psalm 97 sings this of God as King:

*The LORD is king; let the earth rejoice;
let the many islands be glad.
Cloud and darkness surround the Lord;
justice and right are the foundation of his throne.
Fire goes before him;
everywhere it consumes the foes.
Lightning illumines the world;
the earth sees and trembles.
The mountains melt like wax before the LORD,
before the Lord of all the earth.*

Elsewhere the Psalmist sings:

*The LORD is king, robed with majesty;
the LORD is robed, girded with might (Psalm 93:1).*

Where is the majesty of Jesus in his nakedness? Where is his might, hanging upon the cross? Where is there gladness and rejoicing? There was no fire devouring the enemies, nor was

there lightning lighting up the world. Creation did, though, manifest Christ the King.

It was now about noon, says Luke, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon because of an eclipse of the sun (Luke 23:44-45); Mark tells us, At noon darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon (Mark 15:33). Says Matthew, From noon onward, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. (Matthew 27:45). Cloud and darkness do indeed surround the Lord Christ, the King.

At the time of the crucifixion, Matthew tells us, *The earth quaked, rocks were split (Matthew 27:51).* The Romans mocked Jesus and the leaders of the Jews condemned him but the earth trembled before him. The mountains do indeed melt before the Lord, the King.

And, indeed, there is great rejoicing here, with much sorrow. Jesus' promise of salvation and forgiveness to Dismas manifests not only his victory over the power of sin. Not only that, it also shines brightly forth as a beacon of hope to us that through his death on the cross Jesus breaks us free from the tyranny of sin and leads us with Dismas to Paradise.

How, though, can this man, born in a manger and executed as an instigator of rebellion, be our King? The Epistle to the Hebrews says of Jesus, *Son though he was, he learned obedience*

from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of salvation for all who obey him, declared by God high priest according to the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:8-10).

Jesus learned obedience from what he suffered; he learned obedience upon the cross. The hymn quoted by Paul in the Letter to the Philippians sings this of Jesus, *he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:7-8).* It was through the cross that Jesus was made perfect and his mission of salvation and redemption completed. Through his death on the cross he is our high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek was a priest, but he was also a king. If Jesus is our high priest according to the order of Melchizedek, then he is also our king. Through his death on the cross, Jesus is King. Indeed, the Philippians hymn continues, *Because of this, God highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11).*

The majesty of Jesus, the splendor of Jesus, the glory of Jesus, all is revealed in and through his cross. We, too, are

called to share in the kingship of Christ. At baptism, the priest said to us,

God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin, given you a new birth by water and the Holy Spirit, and welcomed you into his holy people. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation. As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as members of his body, sharing everlasting life (Rite of Baptism 98).

We are called to share in the kingship of Christ and St. Paul points out for us the way to do so. He writes to Timothy: *If we have died with him we shall also live with him; if we persevere we shall also reign with him (II Timothy 2:11-12).* Jesus himself says to us, *If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me (Luke 9:23).* By carrying our own cross each day and sharing in his sufferings, we will come to share in the kingship of Christ and reign with him, but only through the Cross. There is no other way. The cross must be embraced. Through the daily carrying of our cross in union with Jesus we, too, will be with him in Paradise. The resurrection awaits those who embrace the cross!

St. Peter Damian, a bishop of the twelfth (?) century, says this of the majesty, the splendor, and the glory of the cross:

In short, the cross is the death of vices and the fount and the life of all virtues. The cross is the footpath to those just beginning, a highway for those running, and a secure resting place for those who arrive. The cross is a gratuity for the new recruits, a fortress for the soldiers, and a pension for the veterans. The cross is the strength of those who fight on bravely, a place of recovery for those who are staggering, and a crown for the victorious. The cross bears momentary death and then compensates with eternal life. The cross robs us of earthly things that it may enrich us with the heavenly, teaches us to hunger that we might be satisfied, instructs us in humility that it might exalt us, and employs patience that it might crown us. The cross is the rule for those who live in Christ, the distinct standard of righteousness, and the discipline for all honest customs. The cross terrifies the devil, putting him to flight, that it may then invite the angels to approach us. It restrains the fantasies of our imaginations and introduces the Holy Spirit into our chaste and pure breasts. At length, the cross refreshes the weary, invigorates the infirmed, and comforts those afflicted with the private irresolution of a desperate mind. What more should I say, seeing as it is through the cross that the King of Glory has rescued us from the fetters of that cruel robber and, like a

raging destroyer, blew open that infernal prison?" (The Exaltation of the Holy Cross, 8).