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Royal Dignity in Persecution

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Royal Dignity in Persecution

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Feast of Christ the King

Sunday Readings for November 24, 2013 for Cycle C:

2 Sm 5:1-3; Ps 122; Col 1:12-20; Lk 23:35-43

ROYAL DIGNITY IN PERSECUTION

Lawrence E. Frizzell

During an intense election campaign in England, a graffito appeared on the wall of a university town: "No man is worthy to lead other men." Extreme pessimism such as this would foster anarchy, but a sense of humility as candidates approach the challenges of government would indeed be salutary. From early times the people of Israel acknowledged God alone as their King. "The LORD shall reign forever and ever" (Ex 15:18). After Saul had disappointed God, Samuel was sent to Bethlehem and was guided to anoint the youthful David to show divine election (1 Sm 16:1-13). Acknowledging that he was but God's servant, David was victorious over Goliath and gained the people's favor (1 Sm 17:1-18:7). Ever respectful of Saul as God's anointed one, David did not try to usurp the throne but waited patiently for the divine plan to unfold. Through the prophet Nathan, David heard marvelous assurances. "Your house (dynasty) and your kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever" (2 Sm 7:16). The king would represent the chosen people before God and experience divine favor and guidance. "I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me" (2 Sm 7:14).

Although the Davidic dynasty was swept away in the Babylonian Exile and Zerubbabel was not able to restore it, the prophets and psalmists continued to instill the people with hope for an ideal king in the future. Anointed by God and therefore to be known as Messiah, this ruler would bring the justice and order that lead to true peace. Fifty years or so before the time of Jesus this theology was expressed in prayer.

Lord, you are our King forever and ever... You, O Lord, chose David to be king over Israel, and you made an eternal oath...that his kingdom would not come to an end in your sight... Behold, O Lord, and raise up for them their king, the son of David, at the time you know, O God, to rule over Israel your servant. (Psalms of Solomon 17:1, 4, 21)

The evangelists Matthew and Luke drew upon prophetic teachings to elucidate the Church's understanding of Jesus and his mission. He is Son of God and descendant of David. St. Luke stressed the royal character of Jesus' work from his account of the Incarnation. "He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (1:32-33). Gabriel's message to Mary echoes the prophecy of Nathan and other teachers in ancient Israel. When the evangelists described how Jesus entered Jerusalem astride a donkey, they recalled the words of a later prophet: "See, your king shall come to you; a just savior is he, meek and riding on a donkey..." (Zec 9:9). Luke recorded that the disciples proclaimed: "Blessed is the king who comes in the Name of the Lord" (19:38, see Psalm 118:26). The royal mission of Jesus should

bring peace to Jerusalem, fulfilling the angelic hymn that celebrated his birth (see Luke 2:14).

Because many Jews of the time hoped that God would send the Messiah to deliver their land from Roman oppression, Jesus had to combat inadequate notions of his mission. Even after the resurrection disciples asked: "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). So Pilate asked Jesus if he claimed to be "King of the Jews" (Lk 23:3), a title that would sound treasonous to a servant of the Empire. Remarkable as it seems for us in an age saturated with written reports about virtually everyone of note, "King of the Jews" is all that was written about Jesus during his earthly life.

Does anyone ever stop to reflect on the impact of verbal abuse on those who are suffering physically or mentally? Three categories of people lashed out at Jesus during his final agony. The leaders of any community should be sensitive to the affliction of the poor, but for many a criminal is beyond pity. Innocent or guilty, the accused stands condemned. The titles "Messiah" and "Elect" should bespeak evident signs of God's favor, yet Jesus was like many teachers who bore the brunt of a negative reaction to their instructions (see Psalm 22:8-9; Wisdom of Solomon 2:12-20). Virulent prejudice may come from those assigned to execute justice in society, and this occurs especially when soldiers exercise police duties. How many in our day have been stripped of their sense of dignity in prison or on the scaffold?

Luke alone tells of the repentant thief, who is moved in compassion to defend the innocence of Jesus. Then he implicitly accepts the truth of the title on the cross of Jesus. He begged for the clemency that belongs to royal privilege. "Jesus, remember me when you enter into your reign!" The reply is one which we all hope to hear as we face death: "This day you will be with me in paradise."