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The Royal Dignity of Christ and Its Implications

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The Feast of Christ the King

Sunday Readings for November 23, 2014 for Cycle A:

Ez 34:11-17; Ps 23; 1 Cor 15:20-28; Mt 25:31-46

THE ROYAL DIGNITY OF CHRIST AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Lawrence E. Frizzell

People today may have difficulty accepting the title "king"; some may consider this to be an ancient, perhaps outmoded feast of the Church. However surprising it may seem, it was introduced into the calendar of the universal Church only in 1925. Then in 1970 it was transferred from the last Sunday of October to the final Sunday of the liturgical year. So the Church of the past century considered this title to be important for appreciating the person and work of Christ. Indeed, we correctly esteem the ideals underlying true democracy, but that model of human community cannot replace the order of all creation toward the Creator. The purpose of creation is to serve God and the role of human beings as viceroys of God is to guide the rest of creation toward its fulfillment. Because sin has distorted the way in which human beings live, their royal dignity as creatures made in the divine image was marred. As the new Adam, Christ in his human nature restored the possibility for us to exercise our vocation fully.

From ancient times people addressed God as King when they expressed faith in the one God as Creator and provident Lord of history. The creature stands in awe before the King, the wayward subject before the Master. However, this experience must be balanced by prayers wherein God is addressed as Father and the divine activities of mothering children are described. The child stands with loving confidence under the protection of a beneficent Father. At the consummation of history the risen Christ will hand the kingdom over to God the Father (1 Cor 15:24), subjecting himself and all the faithful to the Father so that God may be everything to everyone (15:28).

St. Paul described the work of Christ as the destruction of all powers that refuse to serve God, placing all enemies, even death itself, under his feet. Evil must be purged from creation so that the fullness of Christ's life in the resurrection can be shared with those receptive to divine gifts. This imagery of Christ the Davidic warrior (see Rv 19:11-21) conveys only a partial understanding of the way in which history will reach its consummation.

The parable of the sheep being separated from the goats inspired Michelangelo's awe-inspiring Last Judgment scene behind the altar in the Sistine chapel. The parable, of course, presupposes the keeping of the commandments and focuses on the acts of mercy that manifest imitation of God, which is the great moral challenge in the biblical tradition.

Created in the divine image, each of us must recognize the same reflection in every other human person. Those deprived of the outward signs of that dignity must receive our special attention. Hunger, thirst and nakedness represent the absence of food, drink and clothing; in a similar way, the stranger would likely be without shelter. Those deprived of liberty by disease or by imprisonment need the ministry or service of the healthy and free. The very fact of sharing with

the unfortunate will made us appreciate the gifts we have, gifts which are intended for the common good.

"I assure you, as often as you did it for the least of my brothers (and sisters), you did it for me" (Mt 25:40). What a surprise to learn that all acts of merciful service are in fact extended to Christ himself! Two points derive from this teaching. First, the creature made in God's image must be recognized as identified with the suffering Christ, who is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Col 1:15). Secondly, the risen Christ urgently demands that the love he shared with humankind be extended with such generosity that all will be elevated to their rightful dignity as God's children. To those who live according to these principles, the King's invitation will open new dimensions of life. "Come! You have my Father's blessing! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world" (Mt 25:34).