

Feast of Christ the King / Thirty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time Year B

Dan 7:13-14

Ps 93:1-2, 5

Rev 1:5-8

John 18:33b-37

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Today is the Church's New Year's Eve. Next week, we begin a new Church year with the first Sunday of Advent. The great cycle which begins with our preparation for the coming of Christ now comes to an end, with today's celebration of the feast of Christ the King. And so, although few of us are giving or going to parties, and although no wave of college bowl games will blanket our t.v. screens tomorrow, today is New Year's Eve.

As such, it is a time for resolutions. Just as we mark the coming of another January 1st by considering what we want to do, change, and avoid in the upcoming year, so the feast of Christ the King should find Christians doing the same thing, as we leave one year behind and begin another in the life of the people of God. Endings and beginnings are good times for resolutions.

However, New Year's resolutions are tricky things. Often, we are in the midst of doing the every thing we promise we will begin to avoid tomorrow. I can recall any number of New Year's Eve parties where I and others made such resolutions. One friend, Paul, always resolved to stop smoking. However, Paul always made this resolution with a lit cigarette in his hand, and his "absolutely, positively last" pack of cigarettes bulging in his shirt pocket. Another friend, Paula, always resolved that this was going to be the year she lost weight. But Paula always made this resolution with a generous slab of cheesecake or a pile of brownies on her plate. I, comfortably seated in a nice, soft chair, would vow to start running each morning. But 5:00 a.m. on a grey January morning makes the execution of a resolution feel like persecution. It's better to stay in bed and think up rhymes for a homily than suffer the torments of oxygen depletion, muscle strain, and nausea. And all of that comes just from getting dressed...

You have probably felt this way, too, about a lot of your resolutions. The first handful of times, we may have made resolutions with a genuine hope; after a few more years, it became less likely but we hung on by a thread; but eventually our resolutions became an empty ritual, just something to say on New Year's Eve, a holiday observance which has little chance of making it to February intact. Each year, as the winter weeks ground on, we had to work less and less hard to find more and more good reasons to bend, twist, and break our resolutions. We couldn't quite give up the habit of making resolutions, but we also couldn't quite deny the truth of our experience: It was very unlikely we would follow through on what we resolved.

Today, Christ places before us a resolution that challenges every one, whether we are married or single, whether we have children or not, whether we go to work or school each day, whether we are retired or starting out. Christ challenges us to be devoted to the truth.

In today's gospel, Jesus is interrogated by Pilate regarding the nature of his kingship. Jesus' response is to point around him and say, "Where are my followers? Where are my attendants, my ministers, my servants? What kind of king can I be, when I stand before you without guards, without advisors, without friends? What kind of threat can I be to you?"

When we think of kings, we usually think first of power. We think of men with armies and servants and thick-walled castles. We think of richly dressed men with crowns of gold, wrapped round by elaborate ceremony and ancient privilege. But Jesus is a king in service of the truth - a poor king, to be sure, without fine clothes and a bright crown, and a weak king, to be sure, without cavalry and shields. But he is a true king, a king dedicated to the truth of the coming of the kingdom of God, a coming which brings judgment and mercy, a kingdom which demands conversion and offers hope, a reign which claims universal devotion and offers salvation to all. Christ does not lie to Pilate. But he also knows that Pilate can't handle the truth. Christ says, "My kingdom does not belong to this world," but Pilate, and the leaders of the Jews, and most of the crowd do not understand. For them, there are only worldly kings, men of power, sometimes men of conscience, almost always men devoted to self-preservation, glory, and more power.

Pilate also serves the truth - not the truth of the coming kingdom, but the truth of self-interest. He hears the crowd cry out, "If you do not kill him, you are no friend of Caesar," and he knows what that means: his job is on the line. Pilate is a Roman administrator, and his career depends on his dealing efficiently and quickly with any challenge to Roman power, real or apparent. So Pilate acts, and his decision makes it clear that the greatest truth he serves is his own advantage. He chooses to protect his job, to flick this Jewish peasant away like lint, to build up his reputation and advance his career. Pilate, famous for asking the Lord, "What is truth?", knows very well what it is. Pilate's truth is the good of Pilate, and he serves that truth with all his heart.

On this feast of Christ the King, on this New Year's Eve, we must ask ourselves who we imitate: Jesus, who dedicates himself entirely to the service of God's truth? Or Pilate, who dedicates himself entirely to the service of self-truth, of reputation, power, and advancement?

Our resolution, this day and always, must be to let the truth of the Gospel take over more and more of our lives, to let it spread from this altar and this pulpit out into our homes, our families, our workplaces, our neighborhoods, our vacations and our weekends. To vow to follow Christ not just when we are wrapped in the warm glow of the coming holidays, but when there is a cost, when the bill comes due in the long grey months of winter and the in the bright sunshine of June.

How many confessions from women have I heard that began with the words, "When I was young, I got pregnant, and my parents took me to get an abortion"? Too many. Parents, who should know the truth, who have a special obligation to be the first teachers of the faith for their children, instead lead them astray, speaking with the voice of deadly convenience rather than Christian love for life. And the truth of Jesus Christ is betrayed.

How many Catholics have I heard say, "We really need capital punishment. We have to protect ourselves from violent criminals; we must give the family closure"? Too many. Christians, who gather in the name of a man executed by the state, who have an obligation to uphold the value of every human life, sinner and saint alike, instead go astray, speaking with the voice of vengeance or utility rather than Christian conscience. And the truth of Jesus Christ is betrayed.

How many Catholics have I met at the door of the church, heading out from these walls with the body and blood of Christ within them, who spend the rest of the Lord's day without a thought for a parent or grandparent, an aunt or uncle, a cousin or brother or sister who lies unvisited in the hospital or nursing home, who goes unsupported or in a time of marital difficulties or financial hardship, who goes uncomforted in a time of mourning? Too many. How many of us here today will fail to live the truth we hear, fail to live the truth we eat and drink, the truth of

mercy, compassion, and sacrifice? Too many. And the truth of Jesus Christ is betrayed.

This is our New Year's Eve. The season of Advent begins next Sunday. This is the time to look back over the last year, and assess our lives, and decide what will be different in this coming year. What truth will we serve? And how much of our lives will we put in service to that truth? Will we carry our commitment to Christ out of here and into our homes, schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces? Do we have one truth here, and another for the rest of our week? Do we try to serve two masters - or three, or four? Or, like Christ, "the faithful witness," is our commitment to the truth of God's love and mercy so passionate, so overwhelming, that it floods our minds and hearts and springs forth in action: works of justice and sacrifice, words of patience and forgiveness, devotion to wisdom and faithful witness.

Jesus, the king devoted to truth, gave his life for God's will. What portion, or what sliver, of our lives will serve the Gospel this year - and how much of us will remain a servant of self-interest, a subject of pride, a follower of that which impresses and pleases and soothes, but which cannot save?