

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Solemnity of Christ the King
November 20, 2016

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When the Solemnity of Christ the King was established by Pope Pius XI in 1925, it may well rank as the least controversial papal promulgation of all time! Why? Because no Christian believer would dispute that Christ is King. The indications that this is so are found throughout the New Testament. The evidence is in big events and little experiences. The big events are Christmas, Easter, and Ascension Day. Christ is declared Prince of Peace, *Christus Victor*, and “seated at the Right Hand of the Father.” But you and I should also be interested in the little experiences. These events unfold on “stage two”. But they may be closer to our own experience of Jesus.

Throughout the New Testament friend and foe alike began to discern in their experience of Jesus the discovery of a King and His Kingdom. There is a discernible pattern in the discovery. It was subtle, suddenly apparent, and happened in strange places. One of the gospels associated with today’s Feast tells of the confrontation of Blessed Jesus with the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. On a Friday morning in about the year we now call 33 A.D. God Incarnate was a prisoner tied with ropes. But He did not plead His case. He declared, “My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world then would my servants fight.” That is a strange and subtle place for the declaring of a kingship.

But there is more. It is at an execution later that same day in a place called Calvary. And the second thief, the one called *Dismas*, or “the good thief” is the only person in that “Place of a Skull” who does not tell Jesus to “Save yourself.” People often learn things through suffering, things which run counter to ordinary thinking. Dismas learned a lesson that escapes most of us most of the time. This man had probably never before met Jesus and heard Him speak. This man was a common crook; he had been caught, tried, found guilty, and was now getting what a cruel society did to such people. Yet he was the first man in history to grasp a key mystery of our faith: *God in Christ had absolutely no intention of saving Himself!* This common thief connected the dots. He realized that self-preservation is a human instinct and that God doesn’t have it because God doesn’t *need* it. God is not endangered by anything! This does not take anything away from the suffering of Jesus in His Passion. But the observant thief came to the conclusion that the

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Man hanging on a Cross next to him was exactly where He willed to be. It was not weakness. It was choice. It was *divine* choice. It was the *regal* choice of a king who is completely in command.

So the thief was the only one at Golgotha who did not say “Save yourself.” The good thief was no theologian. Hanging on a cross is probably not a good time for speculative thinking anyway. But this man was an eyewitness to Christ’s submission to pain and death. And in that submission Dismas perceived divinity. Others at the Cross remembered this man’s remarkable words. He said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingly power.”

The Gospel does that. It overturns all the assumptions about life and fortune which can so mislead us and prevent us from totally following the Lord. If the thief still had friends on that day they were weeping for him. But Good Friday was in fact the best day of his life! It was the day the reign of Christ broke into his life, the day he had made a friend of God Himself, and in the most unlikely circumstance imaginable. And it can happen like that to you and me.

When it *does* happen in us, Jesus is no longer understood as a nice companion, or a religious symbol, or a personal resource in time of need, or anything over which we have control and choice. Rather, when we have experienced His kingly power, grace, beauty, presence, energy, and demand, we realize we are not in control but *He is*. He is no ordinary king! His power is so secure, so loving, so ultimate, and so attractive, that having rightly assessed the situation, our self-assertion will take one last look at itself *and choose Christ*. It is when we choose Christ that He reigns, suddenly, decisively, and *wonderfully*, in us.