

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford at Evensong & Benediction  
The Solemnity of Christ the King  
November 26, 2017

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When the Solemnity of Christ the King was established by Pope Pius XI in 1925, it may well have been the least controversial papal promulgation of all time! No Christian would ever dispute that Christ is King. In the New Testament we have indications that this is so. The evidence is found both in big events and little experiences. The big events are Christmas, Easter, and Ascension Day, which declare Christ as Prince of Peace, *Christus Victor*, and *Christus Regnant*. But we may be more interested in the *little* experiences. Why? The little experiences may be closer to our own experience of Jesus.

In the New Testament, friend and foe alike began to discern in their experience of Jesus the discovery of a King and His Kingdom and that the discovery 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. God Incarnate happened to be a prisoner tied with ropes. But He said, "My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world then would my servants fight."

One use of irony is the exposure of a betrayed meaning. Irony surrounds the whole Incarnation of Christ, from His Conception to His Ascension. And nowhere is it more prevalent and apparent than during the Passion. Christ is King was an *accusation*. The Jews used that phrase to get the Roman governor's attention. In return, Pontius Pilate chose the same phrase to taunt the Jews. And to rub their noses in it he had an inscription placed on a placard over the Lord's head on the Cross. "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." The irony in the Gospels is that even the people who were enemies of Christ, by their word and actions declared His authority over them.

There is an even stranger place for the revealing of a king. It takes place on a grisly execution hill. 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. Hanging on a cross 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.

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Dismas 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 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.

So the thief is the only one who does not say "save yourself." He is an eyewitness to Christ's submission to pain and death. And in that submission Dismas perceives divinity. He says, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingly power."

The Gospel 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 any friends 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. It was 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 Sunday morning 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, 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.