

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Solemnity of Christ the King
November 25, 2018

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All year we observe feasts and memorials the observance of which date to ancient times. We trace the cult of a particular saint to evidence of a shrine or grave or the writings of a contemporary historian. But the observance we celebrate today is only *ninety years old*. Pope Pius XI established the Solemnity of Christ the King in the Year of Jubilee 1925.

It did not take Holy Church nearly 2000 years to discover that Christ is King! Rather, the Church was giving expression to a fact universally recognized by Christians. The message of Christ the King is that the claims of Christ come first, and that peace and justice are duties all mankind owes to Almighty God before any obligations or allegiances to other men or nations. In 1925 the Holy Father believed the world needed this message underscored. This was six years after the end of the Great War, “the war to end all wars.” Only it didn’t! What Pope Pius XI didn’t know in 1925 was that the world was *in between* the two bloodiest wars in history.

What do we mean when we declare Christ is King? To answer, today’s feast shows us *two kingships*. A Roman territorial governor represents one. The other is a Jewish prisoner bound by a rope. Pontius Pilate knew about kings, and what he knew he didn’t like! He knew all kings are potential enemies. They create barriers between people and demand strict loyalties. Even when kings form alliances and make treaties, the agreements are *tied to the person of the king*, and there is no permanent unifying force. Once upon a time there was a Pharaoh “who knew not Joseph.” And when his son-in-law congratulated Thomas More on his great friendship with King Henry VIII the saint replied, “If my head could win him a castle in France it should not fail to go.” Kings thrive on division. So Pontius Pilate wanted to know if Jesus was a kingly threat to the Roman tax structure. Pilate didn’t care about the religious scruples of the Jews. For him that was only a complication. The main question Pontius Pilate made to Jesus was, in effect: “Where is our battle ground? What are we going to fight about?” And the Roman governor was baffled by the answer Jesus gave to his questions.

What did Jesus say? “My Kingdom is not of this world.” This was *not* making a conciliatory statement! The force of it is not, “You have nothing to worry about; I

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am not a rival to your authority.” Rather, it is *the Lord* Who holds authoritative power, and it makes no difference whether this authority is acknowledged or not. By contrast, Pilate’s authority was merely a fabrication of political science. In this confrontation of the governor and the prisoner *we are given a choice*. Those who are Christian disciples have opted for the Man bound with the rope. We assert truth and reality ultimately lie with this Man and that the other represents a cobbled expediency. We cannot give allegiance to two kings. What then do we do with Pontius Pilate and his world? After all, we *live* in that place, work in it, and seek to make converts from it.

That world is passing away. This doesn’t mean that at 6:47 this evening we will be done with it! At 6:47pm it is already tomorrow in Sydney! Rather, to say the world is passing away means it is something like a man’s shadow. Although the shadow has no reality separate from him, the man has to account for his shadow in his daily life. If you are reading a book by sunlight and the time comes when your shadow blocks the light, you simply adjust your position so you can continue to read. The world is like that, a *bothersome* sort of thing we have to put up with in this life. Many of the Saints of the Church have spoken that way. It is bothersome, but *serious business* none the less. Christians spend a lifetime of trials and tribulations making practical use of the conviction that Jesus, not Pilate, is king. Divine truth, not the world’s wisdom, reflects the only correct appreciation of creation. In this lifetime we are not at war with the world. We do not fight the world any more than a man fights his shadow. But we do combat as evil anything that divides us from the truth and teaches us falsehoods.

That fight is mostly within. And Christ reigns when and where we assent to values and make choices conforming to His sovereign will. Sometimes those choices lead us to witness in the public square. After all, the Lord said, “I have come into the world to bear witness to the truth.” That world wants us to keep our religion to ourselves. But Jesus Christ is the Truth. And truth has a compelling power over human hearts, which, after all, have been made in the image and likeness of God. Everyone who comes to the truth is becoming *a subject of Christ the King*.