

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford at Evensong & Benediction  
The Solemnity of Christ the King  
November 24, 2019

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In language and literature, one use of irony is as the exposure of a betrayed meaning. In the gospels irony surrounds and permeates the Incarnation of Christ: from His Conception to His Ascension. It is one of the ironies of the Gospel good news that during the Passion saying “Christ is King” was an *accusation*. The Jews used that word to get the Roman governor’s attention. In return, Pontius Pilate used the phrase as a taunt to the Jews. He had an inscription placed on a placard nailed to the Cross over the Lord’s head: 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, or indifferent to Him, by their words and actions declared His authority over them. It is as if the Lord’s opponents by their own actions betrayed their hidden awareness. The execution squad bowing before the Lord’s feet to nail them to the Cross is not a very different action from those who would bow before Him in worship and adoration in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. Both are declaring Christ as King. It is as if, in time and space, but prefiguring the final judgment, *everyone* has to hail Him as King whether they wish to or not.

It is a characteristic trait that many people betray their own hidden awareness by their actions. We sometimes speak of “body language.” At the Passion, these people were *slumbering within God’s reality*. They were oblivious of Christ’s Kingship over their lives. It was a day to be forever called *Good Friday*, but they did not know that. Their ignorance did not change the fact of what was happening. And they were actually *making* it happen! What was happening would surface whenever and wherever the top layer of their lives was cracked.

That is what happened to two thieves on Good Friday. It is no accident Holy Church provides us with this incident on the Solemnity of Christ the King. The top layer of everyday certainly had cracked for these two thieves! They were about to die a grisly and shameful death. And in their predicament both thieves acknowledged Jesus as the Christ and called out to Him in order to be saved.

For one thief, salvation meant *exemption*. His idea was: “Get me out of here.” We can understand that. But the other thief knew himself to be personally responsible

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for the fix he was in. And so he only asked for mercy. “Lord, remember me.” Jesus spoke directly and openly to this man and brought comfort and promise because the penitent thief’s heart was open for the Lord’s entrance. We have a saying. “When man breaks down, God breaks in.”

A word of caution is needed. We are not in a position to say one thief was saved and the other not. We do not know what Almighty God does with those who in rage and pain still cry out against Him, and in this way imperfectly acknowledge Christ as King. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* sets forth its teaching not as our effort to find God but as God’s revealing His ways in *His search for us* and for all souls. When we look at salvation history we see that Almighty God, through His Beloved Son, has many different ways of finding souls. By His Own provision, the Lord works primarily through His Church. That is His promise. And we see that in our observance of history. How He works *beyond* the confines of His Church is His business. He can even turn our wrong ways into right ways. In all the twists and turns of history God’s way prevails. Good Friday shows many things. But one is the love of God as impregnable and inventive in His search for souls.

So when the penitent thief said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingly power,” that kingdom was *already in place*. And right there, in the most unlikely scene imaginable, *Golgotha*, the execution hill called “the place of a skull” and the epitome of horror, a soul was snatched home to God. It is a momentary example of what it means to declare Christ is King.