

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Solemnity of Christ the King
November 22, 2020

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When you make a journey, having the right traveling companions can make or break the success of the trip. During Our Lord's three-year ministry no one could have wanted a better traveling companion than they had in Jesus. He was friendly, accessible, a charismatic leader, and a trusted advisor. Every once in a while, however, the disciples experienced *something else* about Jesus. And it made their flesh grow clammy with fear! Jesus walking on the storm-tossed sea did that to them. It was an image branded on their minds forever. For one of them, the miracle catch of fish did that too. While everyone else was having a good time hauling in the fish, St Peter came to a decisive conclusion: *Jesus knew where the fish were; and He knows me just like that!* And everyone was surprised to see Peter kneeling at His Lord's feet. You can also just hear Peter preaching years later, saying: "*the little girl was stone-cold dead. But He made nothing of it, and told them to give her something to eat.*" The Transfiguration was another such moment, and the eyewitnesses were still groping for words to describe the experience many years later. In all these incidents Jesus was seen to be *something more* than just the trusted familiar friend and traveling companion. The word *king* and *kingly* began to be used. These disciples were the first in a long line of Christians who began to call Jesus both friend and sovereign master. That group includes you and me. And the experience of us all is quite the same as at the very beginning. The King and His Kingdom are discovered to be both *subtle* and often *suddenly apparent*.

One of the gospels associated with The Solemnity of Christ the King gives us a perfect example of those subtle and suddenly apparent ways. It takes place at an execution. *Golgotha*, "the place of a skull" is a strange place to find a king. But this is no ordinary king! The moment is familiar to us. But did you notice the second thief is the only person present who does not say to Jesus "save yourself"? People in pain often learn extraordinary things which run counter to everyday thinking. This man hanging on a cross is an example. We call him *Dismas*, or "the good thief." Somehow he had learned a lesson which escapes most of us most of the time. What was that "somehow?"

Human beings have such a high regard for power. Every year the *Boston* magazine has a lead article ranking the most powerful people in the community. But from

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this fascination for power it does not follow we are curious about what other attributes a powerful person may have. And it is hard to understand someone having such power and not using it! Some people concluded when Jesus did not use His power that meant He didn't have it. But that very thought of not using available power can strain credibility in a very creative way. That is what happened in Dismas. When he considered Christ on the Cross he found a King there. And this discovery forced him to revise his notions about God and about the nature of Divine power.

Dismas had probably never met Jesus or heard Him teach. 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. *Almighty God has absolutely no intention of saving Himself.* Somehow this common thief connected the dots. He suddenly realized self-preservation is a human instinct and that God doesn't have it because God does not need it. God is not endangered by anything! The thief connected that thought with what he saw in this Man hanging on a cross next to him. He came to the conclusion Jesus was exactly where He willed to be. It was not weakness. It was choice. And Dismas knew it was *Divine* choice. Dismas didn't need to read the Gospel account of the Passion. Dismas was *in* the Gospel account of the Passion. And as the eyewitness to Christ's submission to pain and death he says, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingly power."

In the penitent thief we see how the gospel overturns all our assumptions about life and fortune. Those assumptions can so mislead us and prevent us from totally following the Lord. If the thief still had friends on Good Friday they were weeping for him. But in point of fact Good Friday was the best day in 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 it happened in the most unlikely circumstance imaginable.

The thief is the first, but certainly not the last, to acknowledge Christ as King. When that happens in us, Jesus is no longer understood as a nice traveling companion or a religious symbol, or a personal resource in time of need, or anything else over which we have control or choice. Rather, we experience kingly

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power, grace, presence, energy, and demand. We learn we are not in control but He is. He is no ordinary king! His power is so secure, so loving, so ultimate, and so beautiful, that our self-assertion will take one last look at itself and choose Christ over self. *When we choose Christ, He reigns: suddenly, decisively, and wonderfully, in us.*