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LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER 2018

THE CROSS: THE KINGDOM COME

To all the faithful, religious and clergy:

Grace and Peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus.

(Ph 1:2)

[1] In the Cloisters, which are part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, there is displayed the Bury St. Edmunds Cross. This highly unusual altar cross dates from the 12th century. It is a Romanesque cross made of ivory with ninety-two intricately carved figures and ninety-eight inscriptions, adorning its front and back.

[2] On the very top of the front side of the cross stand Caiaphas and Pilate, arguing with each other. The high priest is wagging his finger at Pilate, demanding him to change the charge placed over the head of Jesus on the cross. Pilate refuses. He adamantly stands his ground, pointing to the placard bearing the charge beneath his feet.

[3] All four gospel writers make mention of this placard. They record the fact that, over the head of Jesus on the cross, this sign read, "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews." According to the fourth gospel, Pilate had this charge against Jesus written on it in three languages. In Latin, the language of human government and power. In Greek, the language of culture and wisdom. And, in Hebrew, the language of religion (Jn 19:17-22). Thus, the three greatest forces of the human spirit unconsciously heralded him who is king not of just one people, but of all nations.

[4] It was customary for the Romans to write the charge against a man condemned to death on a rough board in bold letters. On the way to the place of execution, two Roman soldiers would walk in front of the prisoner and two behind him. In front of this grim entourage, a man would carry the placard announcing the prisoner's crime. As Jesus made his way to Golgotha, word about the placard reached the Jewish rulers who had handed Jesus over to Pilate to crucify. They were infuriated. They could not bear to have anyone name him "King of the Jews."

[5] The chief priests were so hostile to Jesus that, even though they longed to be freed of Roman domination, they had claimed Caesar for their king in the trial before Pilate. They masked their hatred of Jesus beneath this sudden profession of loyalty to Rome. They wanted Jesus dead at all costs. Pilate was astute enough to understand their hypocrisy. Thus, to publically taunt these hypocrites, he issued his edict of condemnation: "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews." And he would not change it.

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[6] The kingship of Christ is woven like a golden thread throughout the entire Passion narrative. In the trial before the members of the Sanhedrin, the chief priests question Jesus about the claim that he is the Messiah. The Jews expected the Messiah to be the Son of David, a royal figure who would cast off the yoke of Israel's oppressors. He would work miracles and establish God's kingdom on earth.

[7] Before the questioning of these lawless judges, Jesus remains silent. "Like a lamb led to slaughter or a sheep silent before shearers, he did not open his mouth" (Is 53:7). The Incarnate Word wordless. Witnesses speak against Jesus. Their testimony is patently false. No grounds can be found to condemn Jesus (Mt 26:59-60). No lie, no falsehood, in thought, word or deed can pass as truth in the presence of Jesus, then and now.

[8] Caiaphas, the high priest, becomes annoyed at the slowness of the court to reach a guilty verdict. He is aware that many were hailing Jesus as the Messiah. Finally, in desperation, he puts Jesus under oath to answer whether or not he is "the Messiah, the Son of God."

[9] Jesus knew that the people were expecting the Messiah to be a political figure. For this reason, throughout his public ministry, he carefully avoided claiming the title of Messiah. He did not wish to stir up the political unrest of his people. Without prudence, courage is foolish.

[10] However, at the end of his life, when the high priest puts Jesus under oath to say whether or not he is the Messiah, Jesus answers in no uncertain terms. Bound and held captive, Jesus is now free to speak. No danger at this point of his organizing a rebellion against Rome. No fear that he would command an army to establish a Jewish state.

[11] In response to Caiaphas' question if he is the Messiah, Jesus solemnly proclaims, "I am; and 'you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven'" (Mk 14:62). In his majestic "I am," Jesus answers both parts of the high priest's question. He is the Messiah. He is the Son of God. And, then with great dignity, he proclaims that he will be the final judge and his accusers will stand before his tribunal. These judges, now blinded by their self-interest, are going to see him return in glory as the Son of Man. Self-interest is always the enemy of truth and compassion.

[12] Caiaphas had asked Jesus if he was the Messiah-King. His line of questioning followed the popular understanding of a political Messiah. In responding, Jesus goes far beyond the expectations of his day. He cites the passage about the mysterious Son of Man who comes at the end of time and establishes God's reign over the whole world (Dan 7:11). In effect, he lays claim not to political power as a king, but to divine authority as the very Son of God Incarnate. He equates himself with God. Truth can never be compromised.

[13] For the Jews who were strict monotheists, Jesus' claim is blasphemy. He must die (Lev 24:16). He cannot be their divine king. Only the one, true God is. They condemn him to death. The highest truths can become servants of the lowliest deeds when our hearts are hardened and our eyes blinded by self-interest. So many crimes continue to be done in the name of religion. True religion never breeds hate, only love; never death, only life.

[14] Since the Jews could not impose the death penalty, they bring Jesus to Pilate for sentencing. As is the custom, Pilate carries out his judicial function, beginning at 5 AM. The chief priests present the only charge that would merit the death penalty in Pilate's eyes. Jesus is a threat to the power of Rome. Thus, they accuse Jesus of claiming to be a king.

[15] Pilate is a realist. The Passover feast is a time of great national expectations. If Jesus is truly, as they say, a king, he is a threat to Rome and must be done away with immediately. In responding to Pilate, Jesus

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proclaims his kingship. But, he distances himself from the popular notion of kingship. He tells Pilate, “If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not here” (Jn 18:35). The kingship of Christ is the reign of truth, justice and peace that come from above. It cannot be imposed by human force.

[16] Finding Jesus innocent of any kind of political kingship, Pilate appeals to the human sympathy of Jesus’ accusers. He has Jesus taken away and scourged. A cowardly compromise. So brutal was Roman scourging prior to execution that some individuals died before they could be crucified. Others went mad.

[17] Jesus is stripped, tied to a pillar and scourged with leather straps with sharp pieces of bone attached. His skin torn, his body drenched in his own blood, the soldiers make sport of him. They robe him in a purple cloak, place a reed in his hand as a scepter and a crown of thorns on his head. They mock him, laughing and hailing him as “King of the Jews” (Jn 19:3). The chief priests, the crowds and attending soldiers will repeat this same taunt at the foot of the cross. When Jesus is brought back to Pilate, he finds him innocent. Yet, out of fear of losing his own position, Pilate hands Jesus over to his enemies to be crucified with the words, “Behold, your King” (Jn 19:14). Beneath the cruel sport of the soldiers and the sarcasm of Pilate, the truth neither could discern: Jesus is a king.

[18] On the cross, Jesus truly dies as king. Before nailing Jesus to the cross, the soldiers offered him wine drugged with myrrh. A common custom offered by these stolid executioners. Or perhaps a small act of compassion in the midst of untold cruelty. The drug was to help the crucified lose consciousness and thus suffer less in dying. But Jesus refuses to take it (Mk 15:23). This seemingly small notice is of great significance.

[19] In Proverbs, the queen mother tells her son Lemuel, King of Massa, that the common criminal should take wine in the moment of suffering to forget his misery. But, she warns him that “it is not for kings, Lemuel, not for kings to drink wine; strong drink is not for princes, lest in drinking they forget what has been decreed, and violate the rights of any who are in need” (Prv 31:4-5). Since Jesus is king, he refuses to be drugged. He will accept death with all his faculties intact. On the cross, he is the king giving true judgment to the world.

[20] Despite his intense agony, the crucified Jesus does not curse; he blesses. He does not condemn; he forgives. The thief on the right of Jesus is moved. In the most audacious cry of one dying man to another, he cries out, “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Lk 23:42). With the eyes of faith, he acknowledges the deepest truth about Jesus. Jesus is truly a king.

[21] In response to the heartfelt prayer of the man crucified on his right, Jesus assures him a place in his heavenly kingdom. There is no sin too great for him to forgive. No matter what hour we turn from ourselves to the Lord and repent, his arms remain outstretched to receive us into his kingdom.

[22] From the first day of his public ministry, Jesus had preached the coming of the kingdom of God (Mk 1:14-15). What Jesus meant by “the kingdom of God,” he revealed in giving us the Our Father. The second petition of this prayer is “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10). Typical of Hebrew poetry, the second phrase is parallel to the first phrase. It repeats it, expands it and explains its meaning. Thus, for Jesus, the kingdom of God is not a geographical territory, a nation or people under a theocracy. Rather, it is that state or condition where God’s will is perfectly done. It is the rule or the sovereignty of God over his creation and all people.

[23] In Jesus’ ministry, the kingdom of God was truly present. As he said to the Pharisees, “Behold, the kingdom of God is among you” (Lk 17:21). But, only those who totally depended on God were entering it (Mk 10:15). And, so it is today. Only when we allow God to have dominion over our hearts and souls, only

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when we submit our thoughts, words, deeds and actions to his law of love do we enter his kingdom.

[24] After Peter confesses Jesus to be the Messiah, Jesus instructs his disciples on the necessity of the cross. Then, he says to them, “Amen, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come in power” (Mk 9:1) . In a word, Jesus acknowledges that the kingdom, though present in his ministry, had not fully come.

[25] At the Last Supper, Jesus institutes the Eucharist as the memorial of his upcoming death and resurrection. And, then he says, “Amen, I say to you, I shall not drink again the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God” (Mk 14:25). Jesus is looking forward at this point beyond his death to the eschatological banquet when the kingdom has come in its fullness.

[26] Jesus’ death on the cross is the moment when he ushers in the kingdom of God in power. A crucified man died exhausted. But, not Jesus. He has strength enough to utter a loud cry before he expires (Mt 27:50; Mk 15:37; Lk 23:46). This is not the cry of an anguished man gasping in relief. It is not the pitiful cry of a helpless victim giving up in despair. It is something much more profound.

[27] The fourth evangelist tells us that Jesus cries out at this moment the words “It is finished” (Jn 19:30). In Greek, it is just one word (τετέλεσται). It is the shortest of all the words spoken by Jesus on the cross. But, in it is contained the whole meaning of Jesus’ mission.

[28] Jesus had once told his disciples, “My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work” (Jn 4:34). In dying, he brings to completion God’s work. He perfectly fulfills the Father’s will, “becoming obedient to death, even to death on the cross” (Phil 2:8) and ushers in the kingdom of God in power.

[29] Returning to the Father, Jesus cries out in a loud voice. It is the shout of triumph. It is the cry of the Conqueror claiming victory. The battle is over. The strife is won. Sin is defeated. Death overcome. From Jesus’ pierced heart, grace is given us in abundance to do God’s will.

[30] In dying, Jesus embodies in his very person the kingdom of God. His obedience to the Father establishes the absolute sovereignty of God over all creation. Through Christ and in him, we enter the kingdom and we are saved. Purpled in his own blood and crowned with thorns, Christ reigns from the cross as King.

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