

SOLEMNITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST, KING OF THE UNIVERSE | YEAR A 26 NOV 2023
Ez 34:11-12, 15-17; 1 Cor 15:20-26, 28; Mt 25:31-46

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe – that's the formal title – while the more familiar title is the Solemnity of Christ the King.

Currently in the world, there are something like 43 countries that still have a king as head of their monarchy. And history is replete with many, many more kings going back to the Old Testament... but none like ours.

As Catholic Christians, we have Christ as our King. Today's Gospel talks about Christ not only as King, but as Shepherd as well. In both roles, Jesus presents what will take place at the Last Judgment, when all are gathered and he separates the good from the bad. And the options are eternal happiness or eternal damnation.

It has been suggested that the fire of hell is no more a punishment than eternal life in heaven is a reward, because both are really a consequence of the decisions we make. That may sound kind of different at first blush, but think about it. At the time of the Last Judgment, Jesus isn't going to make some kind of arbitrary, random decision about our fate. We, ourselves, will have actually decided our own fate, because, as was suggested – and as every person knows, from childhood to maturity – actions do have consequences.

Now, all that sounds a bit heavy, I know... because it is! But what we're talking about is nothing less than our salvation – what the Cross was all about. That's nothing trivial.

At the same time, if we're honestly trying to live our lives as good Christians, aware of one another, and not just our own plight, then we probably don't have too much to worry about. But still, we need to be ready. We always need to be ready, because as we've heard so much in the Scriptures over the past several weeks, we don't know when – we don't know the hour we're going to be called to judgment.

I think sometimes, even as people of faith, we take what we say in the Creed, which we will recite shortly, a little too passively. I know I do on occasion, until I focus on exactly what it is I'm saying, and praying. It is our Profession of Faith – that's how it's headed up in missalettes, and in #148 in the green *Journeysongs* book that you have. It is our Profession of Faith. We are professing our faith – individually and collectively. It's what we believe as Catholic Christians.

It shouldn't be just another familiar prayer that we recite by rote at Mass. It should be something that we acknowledge internally, while we're saying it externally. In it, we confess that Christ came down from heaven for our salvation – to redeem us – and that “he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.” How could we ever be caught unaware if that is what we profess and what we believe? We just need to “stay awake” spiritually in our lives.

The Gospel today, in fact, offers us much hope for what we're already doing, and concrete guidance on what we're missing. When Jesus comes on that Day of Judgment, the Gospel says, he will separate the people, placing them on his right, or on his left. Those on the right inherit God's Kingdom because they gave him food when he was hungry, drink when he was thirsty, welcomed him as a stranger, clothed him when he was naked, cared for him when he was ill, and visited him when he was in prison.

These are things many people frequently do already in their interactions with their brothers and sisters in Christ – maybe not in the terms identified in the Gospel, but in one form or another. In some way, the love of Christ is shown to someone by them. We don't necessarily always recognize what we've done in relation to our faith, or know the import of what it is that we do, and oftentimes it's just something we do almost reflexively. The need is there, and we respond. That's what Jesus is looking for in our lives.

And those on the left are sent into the eternal fire of hell because those same things were left undone in their lives. Those actions that identify them as Christians were not then a part of how they lived their lives, and because they didn't choose Christ then, the rest of their eternal lives will be without him as well. The mercy of Jesus is never in question here.

In paragraph 1035 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* it says that, “The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity... The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs.”

The offer of eternal happiness in heaven with the God Who created us, was first extended to us in baptism. Everything we've done from that point on is our response to that offer. Again, it's oftentimes easier to focus on what we haven't done as Christians, instead of the many things we actually do.

In today's Gospel, Jesus helps us to see the many seemingly minor things we do that are done as Christ himself would have done them – and which, in fact, are not so minor. But it's the not-so-obvious things, sometimes, that make up a greater part of what we do when we reach out to those in need.

Our God is a loving God, and our King is a just King. None of us are perfect human beings, and so sometimes we fail. I don't think Jesus is so much interested in how much we fail as Christians, as he is about how much we persevere in living as faithful followers. The Sacrament of Penance, or Reconciliation, can help us with that. St. Jerome once wrote that, "In the lives of Christians we look not to the beginnings but to the endings."

Each year, the Solemnity of Christ the King is the last Sunday celebration of the liturgical year. The First Sunday of Advent is next Sunday, and the beginning of a new Church liturgical year. Advent is a good time for new beginnings. Actually, every day is a good time for new beginnings with Jesus, in his love that never ends.

In the Afterword of his book, *The Catholic Passion*, David Scott writes about this incredible love. He says, "Everything Catholics believe and do springs from this love that never ends. And everything Catholics believe and do has the objective of inviting the world to share in this love – which begins in this life and continues without end in the life to come."

And for that, we can be eternally thankful.

