

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC November 24, 2019
34th Sunday of Year C Luke 23:35-43

Today we celebrate the feast Christ the King, but as citizens of the United States, our experience of royalty is limited to what we see on TV or read in the tabloids about the comings and goings of the British royals. Even though we say we prefer to live with our democratic institutions, without royalty, the insatiable appetite of the American public for news about the British royal family seems to point to the contrary. The Netflix's docudrama, The Crown, about the life of Queen Elizabeth II, has been renewed season after season. The travails of Meghan Markle and Prince Harry provide ample fodder for the media. Still, a familiarity with royalty is not necessary to understand today's Gospel account of Jesus' crucifixion, despite the fact that the narrative turns the whole notion of kingship upside down and inside out. In fact, the passage describing the events of Jesus' crucifixion seems to parody the whole idea of kingship. Here there is no notion of triumph and power, but of seeming defeat and dishonor that leads to victory of another sort. On the cross, Jesus redefines the very notion of what it means to be a king.

At Calvary we see all the elements usually associated with the king and his court enthroned in splendor, but here everything is reversed, almost as if we are looking at the negative of what we might expect to see in the real picture. The crowd is assembled at Jesus' feet, not in reverential obedience, but to mock and jeer. Soldiers are present, not to carry out His commands, but to finish the job of His execution. The inscription above Jesus' head proclaiming Him in the three languages as "King of the Jews" is placed there, not as some form of royal decree, but as a taunt by the Roman authorities to His own countrymen who brought Him forward for execution. The crown he wears is not one adorned with precious stones, but one woven out of thorns. The two individuals arrayed on either side are not officials of state or trusted advisors, but two common criminals who are simply paying the price of their misdeeds. The little seat placed midway on the cross is no throne, but an ingenious device created by the Roman executioners to prolong the agony of crucifixion. It was designed in such a way that the victim would pull himself up onto this seat in an attempt to fill his lungs with air, but, unable to sustain this effort for very long, would then fall back down gasping for breath, with the process repeated over and over again, until the exhausted victim finally died of asphyxiation.

This inversion of kingship is in one sense fitting, since throughout his ministry Jesus had parodied in word and gesture so many of the false values and assumptions of His day about power, dominance, prestige, wealth and influence, values that were

ultimately all rooted in the notion of monarchy. Here we see how the forces of loveless power, Jesus' executioners, have tried to extinguish the embodiment in Jesus of powerless love; here we see Jesus, faithful to the very end, to the message that He preached. Here we see the "face of God," as it were, revealed—as close as we can get to see who and what God is really like. And, God is revealed not as people might expect, with the attributes of power and domination, but with mercy and compassion; not with revenge or retaliation, but with forgiveness and reconciliation.

Already in this scene of seeming defeat and dishonor, there is a hint of the triumph of Easter Sunday that will emerge out of the shame of Good Friday. The two thieves, in their contrasting attitudes and responses to Jesus, delineate precisely how it is possible for one to perceive the presence of forgiveness and healing entering into life, and for the other to remain locked behind a wall of denial and defiance. In the one's ability to come to terms with the realities of his life, and in the other's failure to do just that, we see the options that are likewise available to us—either to be honest with ourselves in admitting the truth of what is going on in our lives, or to continue to fool ourselves with the self-pity and rationalizations which we are so quick to manufacture, and which serve to mask the real motivation for so much of our behavior.

In today's Gospel, the one we are accustomed to call the "good thief" acknowledges that he is himself responsible for the fate that has befallen him, that he is only paying the price for the crimes he has committed, while the other thief simply joins the crowd in taunting and mocking Jesus, thus providing himself with a cover to avoid any self-confrontation or honest appraisal of his own life. Again, in these two individuals we see portrayed what are two basic attitudes one can take in confronting one's life: the path of an honest self-assessment of a situation, or the path of denial, a denial that can continue up to the very end. Of course, it is the "good thief's" honesty that wins for him the commendation of Jesus, and the assurance that already he is entering into God's reign of justice and peace, of love and truth.

Today's Gospel asks where do we position ourselves: with the frankness and honesty of the "good thief" or with the dogged denial of the other? Are we willing to confront and admit our own failings, our character defects, our deficiencies, or do we prefer to deflect an inward glance by focusing instead on the fault of others? Do we find ourselves in the same predicament again and again and again, but rather than take the time to see where we may have contributed to that sorry state of affairs, prefer instead to put the blame on someone else? The Gospel promises health and healing, and thereby shows the manner in which Christ's kingship is revealed—not in some showy display of power, but in the ability to open the recesses of the human

heart to the possibilities of change and conversion. The power to do just that is the power released on Easter Sunday by the risen Jesus. Let us pray that because, like the good thief, we are honest with ourselves and open to accepting Divine Mercy, we can take that next best step in our lives to walk into Christ's kingdom.