Sermon for Mid-Week Lenten Service, Week 5

# The Text: John 19:17-24

# Jesus reigns from His cross

At the beginning of this Gospel we’re told how, after the Lord called Philip to be a disciple, Philip then found Nathaniel and brought him to Jesus. Jesus showed that he knew all about Nathaniel and Nathaniel responded, “*Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel!*” (1:49) But Jesus hadn’t come to be just another earthly king. At the feeding of more than five thousand people, He slipped away from the crowds who wanted to make Him that sort of king (6:15). He’d come as King to deal with sin and topple Satan (12:31). He’d come to give His divine and human life as the sacrifice for the sin of the world (1:29). At His trial before Pilate He testified, “*My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews … For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth*” (18:36-37). His words to Nicodemus bear witness to the truth of the sinfulness that is ours by nature, from conception. “*That which is born from flesh is flesh*,” He told Nicodemus (3:6). Yet He came to save the world from its sinfulness. He went on to tell Nicodemus the glorious truth that He was the divine Son given by the Father to be lifted up on a cross, “*that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*” (3:14-17).

When at Jesus’ trial, Pilate heard about Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God, he became very afraid. He must have become even more unsettled when Jesus said to him, “*You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin*” (v 11). Pilate knew that the Lord was innocent of the charges that had been brought against Him, but he also didn’t want to get offside with the Jews. He’d already been warned by the emperor Tiberius to treat the Jews well. Since he didn’t want a bad report about him reaching Rome, he readily caved in to the demands for Jesus’ crucifixion. [Maier, 346]

St John gives just the bare facts in his account of Jesus’ journey to Golgotha, and of His being crucified. Crucifixion has been described as “one of the slower and more brutal forms of execution known to man, and certainly the most public”. [Maier, 164] St John barely mentions the cruelty inflicted on Jesus. He makes it clear that Jesus was one with criminals in His death. He says that “*with him* [they crucified] *two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them*” (18). But then he goes on to emphasise the placard that Pilate had placed on Jesus’ cross. He tells us that many of the Jews read the placard, because “*the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city*” (20). Who but a witness at the cross would mention that? He also says that it was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek; Aramaic, the language of the Near East and of the Jews at that time, Latin, the language of the occupying Romans, and Greek, the universal language of the day. On our crucifixes we have a placard with the letters INRI. They’re the first letters of the Latin words, ‘Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews’.

Pilate wanted to save his own skin by having Jesus crucified, but the wording he had written on the placard was his way of slighting the Jews. Leading priests objected to it and suggested that Pilate write instead, “*This man said, I am the King of the Jews*”, but Pilate dug in his heels. Little did he know how true his words were! Jesus was indeed the King, reigning from His cross. It was for this purpose He’d come to this hour so that sinners might be forgiven and the Father who’d sent Him might be glorified (12:27f). Having risen from the dead and ascended to the Father, Jesus now rules over all things together with His Father and the Holy Spirit. He’s not only King of the Jews. He’s King of all people. He wants to rule in the hearts of people with His mercy and steadfast love.

That’s the message of the Psalm that the evangelist quotes from next. He’s the only one of the four evangelists to tell about the division of Jesus’ garments by the four soldiers at the cross. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark tell how Jesus prayed from His cross Psalm 22. John tells about the fulfilment of the verse in that Psalm that says, “*They divided my garments among them, /and for my clothing they cast lots*”. Though written by David, the Psalm graphically describes the suffering and deliverance of God’s Son. That the whole Psalm is His prayer is confirmed by the letter to the Hebrews (2:11-12). It says that these triumphant words are Jesus’ words: “*I will tell of your name to my brothers; /in the midst of the congregation I will praise you*”. The congregation includes people from all nations. The Lord“*rules over the nations*”, it says (v 28), not only over the people of Israel. In words reminiscent of the Old Testament peace offering, eaten by both priest and people, He tells about hosting “a great thanksgiving banquet to celebrate His resurrection from death and victory over the powers of darkness”. [Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 95] It’s a feast for the poor as well as for the rich. Jesus is God’s peace offering for the world. His peace offering saves both Jew and Gentile. He’s also established His supper as a banquet for both Jew and Gentile that brings us the blessings of His cross. In the New Testament, we also “*eat and worship*”, as the Psalm says. What we eat, though, isn’t the flesh of an animal, but the life-giving flesh and blood of our Saviour. His supper points to His coming again in glory and to the eternal banquet that will take place then.

In the meantime, He promises that no one can snatch us out of His hand (10:28). The Mexican priest Fr Miguel Pro believed that in most dire circumstances. In 1926 President Calles brought in a law that required all "churches and religious groupings" to register with the state and that placed restrictions on priests and ministers of all religions. All Catholic churches were closed, the celebration of the sacraments was punishable by imprisonment or death, and the Church was driven underground.

Not long after his ordination, Fr. Pro received permission to return to Mexico incognito and to carry on his ministry undercover. He would show up in the middle of the night – dressed as a beggar or a street sweeper – to baptize infants, hear confessions, distribute Communion, or perform marriages. Several times, disguised as a policeman, he slipped unnoticed into the police headquarters itself to bring the sacraments to Catholic prisoners before their execution.

Before long he was betrayed by an informant, was arrested, and was ordered to be executed. As he walked from his cell to the prison courtyard, he blessed the firing squad and then knelt and prayed silently for a few moments. Refusing a blindfold, he stood, faced the firing squad, and with arms outstretched in the form of a cross, he cried out in a loud, clear voice, "May God have mercy on you! May God bless you! Lord, Thou knowest that I am innocent! With all my heart I forgive my enemies!" As the soldiers lifted their rifles, he exclaimed in a loud voice, "Long live Christ the King!" Reporters who were invited to the execution took many photographs that were printed in newspapers. But instead of discouraging people from following Christ, the photos encouraged them to resist the secular government. [www.catholicnewsagency.com/saint/blessed-miguel-pro-juarez-397]

Jesus is the King who came to die for the sins of all people. He came as King to serve so that we might be saved. All who believe His word have eternal, resurrection life. All who receive His washing with water and the Holy Spirit, enter His kingdom to feast at His table. He shares the glory He now has with His own, so that we may be with Him in the glory of His kingdom, forever.