

Homily for the Hope and Healing Mass of the Adirondack Vicariate

Sunday, November 20, 2022
Church of the Blessed Sacrament
Bolton Landing, NY

The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

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As a priest, there are a handful of crucial moments of time during the weekend. We have some of the obvious and most important ones, like the celebration of Mass, preaching, driving from church to church on the weekends, all good. And then there are the personal times on the weekend, trying to spend Sunday as a day of rest, dinner with family, doing yardwork, all good. And then there's one more crucial span of time, and that's the time spent directly after each Mass on the sidewalk outside.

Why? Well, during Mass, we share Communion with God here in the Eucharist. After Mass, we share communion with each other as a parish community. And that line, that receiving line basically, is a critical part of priestly ministry. It's a chance, maybe a rare chance, for the parishioners to connect with the priest. And I get all sorts of comments...many of you know these comments because you say them to me! It's a time where I'm able to say, "welcome back, haven't seen you in a while!" or for someone to say "Father can you pray for my dad, he took a turn for the worse." Or for someone to say here's a bag of cookies for you. Or for someone to ask a question or file a complaint or make a comment...on and on.

Talking to people after Mass is an art that I am continually mastering. But I love it so much. Sometimes people ask easy questions...about the schedule or something pretty simple. And then there are the lengthy questions. Not difficult, but the kind I feel like saying, let's schedule a dinner sometime and talk. If someone learns that I went to Rome, they typically say, "so what's it like to study in Rome?" I love that question, I love answering that question, but it takes more than 10 seconds.

Another question people sometimes ask: "was it your choice to study this?" The "this" meaning this topic of safeguarding the children and adults in our Church, the ministry of listening and caring for survivors who come forward, the process of how we proceed with those who have been accused...was it my choice to study this.

My usual answer is that this was one of two options presented to me in 2019 when we were discussing further studies. Practically, it was the suggestion of the leaders of the Diocese, but I know in reality it was an invitation from God. And I'm truly glad things have proceeded in this direction.

Why? Because this work, at its core, is a study about how and why some people, including some of my brother priests, have sinned in the worst way imaginable. It's also a study in how we can best reflect God's love and mercy and healing to those in our care, including apologizing to and healing those who have been hurt, and protecting everyone, particularly the most vulnerable in our midst.

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This weekend, we're celebrating the Solemnity of Christ the King of the Universe.

We've heard a lot about kings recently, with the death of Queen Elizabeth II and the new reign of King Charles III, who is now Head of the Commonwealth, 56 different member states. Our president has 50 states, our governor has 62 counties, our bishop has 14 counties. Being head of 56 countries or 50 states of 62 counties or even 14 counties sounds like an awful lot. But today we celebrate a King who is infinitely more powerful, involved, loving, and caring than any king or authority we could ever crown on earth.

Today we celebrate Christ as King of the Universe. That means Jesus Christ as king over the atoms in the distance that have yet to reach our field of vision. That means Jesus Christ as King of people who we'll never meet in this life. The King of creation from the beginning to the end, alpha and omega, of everyone and everything ever. Which necessarily means Jesus Christ is King of me, King of you, King of all who love him and King of all who reject him.

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For our reflection here this morning, I'd like to offer four images of Christ the King, especially as they relate to our mission of Hope and Healing. Christ as the King of Hope, Christ as the King of Peace, Christ as the King of Healing, and Christ as the King of Love.

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Christ as the King of Hope.

Our first reading from the second book of Samuel follows the story of David rising as the King of Israel. David wants to unify the tribes of Israel who are in a messy situation after the fall of Saul in the first book of Samuel. David wants to unify them, and he does that, he establishes a capital city, he's successful in battle, he expands their territory. But, later in his life David makes a commits incredible sins against Bathsheba, and we hear the accounts of jealousy, envy, and actions committed by him that are extremely demeaning and hurtful. The consequences of the decision David made to covet his neighbor's wife creates a ripple effect that lasts through many generations of his family.

What can we take from this? The Israelites are in a state of disunity and they're looking for a leader. They want unity and peace. The last verse of our reading speaks about them anointing him king.

And David had many successes as king, and he had many failures, particularly against the commandments do not commit adultery and do not murder. Looking at this situation from the lens of hope and healing, we can see how David let a lot of the power go to his head. He wanted to play God in certain situations, he wanted control, and that led to dreadful consequences for some of the people around him. We can link him with several examples of abuse and poor decisions, but ultimately it is about an abuse of power.

I'm sure it doesn't take long to think of someone we know who has tried, and maybe succeeded, to act in this way. Abuse of power...trying to get more, greedy, always wanting to climb further and further to the top, wanting to accumulate more and more power.

David's poor actions resulted in consequences, the ripple effect, one thing leading to another. Today, right now, you and I are living with the results of the ripple effect of sin. Something someone did years ago, decades ago, in private, in secret, those effects are being felt today by you and me.

Just like the Israelites, we are a people of hope. The Israelites were hoping for someone who could unify and lead them. We have learned the lesson, through Scripture and through our own lives, as witnesses to the ripple effect, we've learned to find our hope in Jesus Christ alone. Placing our hope in Christ as the King of Hope will not lead us astray, because Christ does not abuse his power.

The song "In Christ Alone" comes to mind, that first line: In Christ alone, my hope is found. Let us place our trust in Christ as the King of Hope.

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Christ as the King of Peace.

St. Paul in our beautiful second reading is speaking to the Colossians, he gives us this magnificent litany of the characteristics of God: Firstborn of all creation, created heaven and earth, he is before all things, he is head of the body, the church, he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.

And importantly, at the end, St. Paul says for “in him, [in Jesus,] all the fullness was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things for him, making peace by the blood of his cross.”

“Making peace by the blood of his cross.” How does this make sense? Peace coming from blood, peace coming from the worst thing humans have done, which was to put God on the cross. How can any sense of peace come from that?

I’ve read some accounts written by survivors of how they are somehow able to find peace despite enduring some of the worst situations imaginable. Jesus knows that pain, he went through it. Jesus knows that betrayal, he suffered it. Jesus knows that infidelity, he endured it. Ultimately, out of love, he is able to provide peace to us. There is a peace in knowing that someone else shares our pain, they’ve experienced something similar.

In similar, far less dramatic sense, it’s therapeutic and healing in a way for me to call my priest friends and share some things that aren’t going quite right, something that’s a little off, just to get it off my chest and talk about it. It helps to hear the reassurance from someone else. They may not share my identical pain, it may not be pain from the same source, but knowing that we are not alone in our suffering and struggles provides a step of relief.

Our God who created all things in heaven and on earth, who created all things through him and for him, who holds all things together as St. Paul says, it is that same God, Jesus Christ, who endured the shedding of his blood for you and for me, who we proclaim in the Creed “suffered death and was buried.” His suffering led to resurrection, led to peace, and he offers us that companionship and that gift of peace, the peace of being able to relate to someone who has been through it all.

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Christ as the King of Healing.

Another line from that same reading stands right out to me. “Christ delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.” From darkness, to a kingdom with Jesus. From the power of the enemy to the love of the Savior.

What does this transition look like, that from darkness to light? In other words, what is the healing journey like? I think that question is impossible to answer with one generic statement. Each person’s journey from darkness to light is unique, it’s full of starts and stops, progressions and regressions, advances and setbacks.

I saw a commercial for the new iPad recently which claimed that this one is faster and quicker than the old ones. It seems like healing is the exact opposite of that. It’s not fast, it’s not quick. But healing does exist.

Some people, rightly so, struggle to find healing within the Church. They may ask: how can a Church that has harmed people also be the one to offer healing? Some find healing from forgiveness, others may not. Some find healing through diocesan efforts like a healing garden or a retreat, others may not. Some find healing through discussions, conversations, support groups, others may not. The point is, there is no one guaranteed way that will cover all the bases. Each person has unique circumstances and a unique path ahead.

There is one commonality, however, and that is the King of Healing, Jesus Christ. As we just heard, “He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.” We only have to look to the numerous stories of healing for proof of this, Jesus healing the man born blind, heals the crippled, Mary Magdalene, the woman at the well, raising Lazarus from the dead...and surely there are countless others.

People within the church can disappoint us, priests, bishops, parish staff, that’s a given. People within our families and workplaces can disappoint us, that’s a given. Our civil leaders, our government officials can disappoint us, that’s a given. These things happen each day. The key is to take St. Paul’s words to heart: that *Christ*, not anyone else, but Christ as our King of Healing is the one to deliver us from the power of darkness.

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Christ as the King of Love.

One of my favorite hymns begins with this image of Christ as the King of Love. “The King of Love by shepherd is, whose goodness fails me never.” The fourth verse goes like this:

In death’s dark vale I fear no ill
With you, dear Lord, beside me;
Your rod and staff my comfort still,
Your cross before to guide me.

Our Gospel scene today is that of the crucifixion. And in this scene with the two criminals hanging on their own crosses on either side of Jesus, I can almost hear one of them saying those exact words: “In death’s dark vale I fear no ill, with you dear Lord beside me; Your rod and staff my comfort still, your cross before to guide me.”

The criminal says to Jesus: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus responds: “Amen I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Today you will be with me in Paradise. Here he is, hanging on a cross, wrongly suffering at the hands of the soldiers, and what is he doing? Offering the criminal and indeed each one of us the invitation to paradise. It’s an offer of pure love, of pure assurance from Jesus that he is not leaving us behind, he is not abandoning us to suffer alone or in silence, he is with us through it all.

If we put ourselves in the place of the criminal on the cross, what’s the thought process? The Gospel quotes one criminal as saying “indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man (Jesus) has done nothing criminal.”

Jesus hasn’t done anything criminal! In fact, throughout his life, he’s done the opposite of crime. He’s performed miracles, he’s shown his love, he’s healed people. But despite that, we find him in the cross, and despite the unjust persecution he’s endured, he offers his loving invitation for the criminal and us to be with him in paradise. And when? He didn’t say later you will be with me in Paradise, he didn’t say in a couple years you’ll be with me in Paradise, he says today you will be with me in Paradise. Our King of Love offers us his unconditional, undivided, unending love to each of us, just as he did to the two on the crosses beside him.

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Maybe one of these kingly images of Christ resonates with you. Maybe a couple of them do.

The Israelites as a hopeful people, seeking a king of unity but ultimately finding disappointment in a human king who uses his power in a selfish way. They need Christ, the King of Hope.

St. Paul speaking of Christ as the one who makes peace by the blood of his cross, taking a painful situation and transforming it into a redemptive one, and most importantly sharing with us that he has been through this pain, he knows our struggles, and makes peace through that pain. They see Christ, the King of Peace.

St. Paul again speaking of God delivering us from the power of darkness into the light of his kingdom. The healing process from darkness to light, from suffering to resolution. This is Christ, the King of Healing.

And finally, Jesus showing his love even in his last moments on the cross. In response to the criminal's request remember me when you come into your kingdom, he says "Today you will be with me in paradise." This is Christ, the King of Love.

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To conclude, today marks the last Sunday in the liturgical year. Next Sunday we begin fresh with cycle A and the First Sunday of Advent. With this fresh start of a new liturgical year, I'd like to propose my new liturgical year's resolutions:

May Christ reign in our lives as the King of Hope. That although we've experienced and live with places of deep darkness, sadness, hurt, pain, ignorance, rejection, fear, smallness, and distance, our God is a God of Hope. Just as he instilled in the Good Thief on the cross the hope for togetherness in paradise, he shares that with you and with me. The next best thing to being together with Christ in Paradise is being together with him here at the altar in the Eucharist. It's my resolution to share that hope of Christ with all whom I meet, especially those who are hurting.

May Christ reign in our lives as the King of Peace. That although we've experienced and live with places of division, disunity, discord, dissent, separation, detachment, and disinterest, our God is a God of Peace. Just as he instilled in the Colossians through the words of St. Paul, Jesus made peace through the blood of his cross, turning the worst thing that could happen to him into the best thing that could happen for us, turning death into resurrection and salvation. It's my resolution to share that peace of Christ with all whom I meet, especially those who feel separated.

May Christ reign in our lives as the King of Healing. That although we've experienced and live with places of hurt, harm, injury, maltreatment, cruelty, neglect, abuse, trauma, our God is a God of healing. Just as he healed those who sought him out, it is He who will heal us. Will it happen overnight? Maybe, probably not. Will he place other people and circumstances in our lives to help the healing process? Most likely. Will he ever abandon us in this process of healing? Never. It's my resolution to share that healing of Christ with all whom I meet, especially those who are suffering.

May Christ reign in our lives as the King of Love. That although we live with and experience places of hatred, hostility, animosity, aggression, intimidation, distrust, violence, and fear, our God is a God of love. Loving means unconditional care for the other, and God shows us time and again that he loves us with that love, the same love he showed to the Israelites who were wandering, the same love he showed to the criminals on the crosses next to him as he promised them paradise. It's my resolution to share that love of Christ to all whom I meet, especially those who feel rejected.

I'd invite you to join me in these resolutions. May Christ be, for you and me, today and forever, and all places and all times of our universe, the king of Hope, the king of Peace, the king of Healing, and the king of Love. Amen.