

Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, Year B

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1st Reading Daniel 7:13–14

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 93:1,1–2,5

2nd Reading Revelation 1:5–8

Gospel John 18:33b–37

As a symbol, an icon, the cross has become strongly associated with Christianity writ large. There are many variations, but the basic form of an intersecting vertical and horizontal line are instantly recognizable and almost undeniably Christian. The crucifix, however, while being fundamentally a cross variation, is much more restricted in its associations. Protestant churches, by and large, do not use crucifixes. In the West, at least, that is almost exclusively the domain of the Catholic Church.

Even so, there is still a wide variety in the way crucifixes are depicted. At one end of the spectrum you have crucifixes so abstract and stylized that they are little more than lines and shapes to suggest the presence of the corpus hanging on the cross. A couple of lines for the arms, a circle for the head, maybe a couple more lines to indicate the knees. Everything so completely understated that it is only the intimate familiarity that we have with the form which allows us to recognize it as a depiction of the crucifixion. At the other end of the spectrum you have crucifixes which are so detailed and realistic that you can practically feel the pain Jesus endured: the sting of sweat in the lash marks on his back, the dripping of the blood down his face from the cuts made by the crown of thorns, the blinding pain of the nails through the hands and the feet, the slow agony of being suffocated by your own body weight. In between are crucifixes like the one above my head from Fr Stephen: a body depicted, not simply represented, but simplified and almost cleaned up in a way. Jesus's face is almost serene, it is so devoid of emotion. The body doesn't hang from the cross so much as just rest on it. There's not an attempt to deny the pain and suffering, but the fact of the crucifixion is far more important to the composition than its reality.

And then there are what I might call the unusual compositions. Ones like the Resurrection crucifix, where Jesus is depicted on the cross, but in his risen

state, practically jumping off the cross. Still wounded, but not restrained by those wounds. And where a typical crucifix depicts Jesus nearly naked, with only a loincloth to protect our sensibilities, on a Resurrection crucifix Jesus is almost always fully clothed, though perhaps with a garment that only goes over one shoulder so that the wound in his side is visible. This is Jesus as he would have appeared on the road to Emmaus, in the upper room, or on the shores of the Sea of Galilee: easily mistaken for an ordinary person at a distance or when not given your full attention, but clearly the risen Lord for those who really look.

Today, however, I want to talk about another unusual crucifix composition. Today we celebrate Jesus as King of the Universe and there is crucifix variation which specifically aims to depict Jesus under this title. It is still undeniably a crucifix, with Jesus firmly nailed to the cross, but like the Resurrection crucifix, this isn't a nearly naked and clearly suffering Jesus, but rather one fully clothed and in clear command of his faculties. His clothing, however, is not the simple white tunic, maybe with a red sash or cloak, that would be typical of the Resurrection crucifix, but rather made of cloth of gold or purple velvet and decorated with jewels and embroidery. On his head is not a crown of thorns, but a royal crown of state, made of gold and jewels and velvet, the kind of thing that Charles wore at his coronation. This is Jesus fully vested in all the royal attire that one would expect of a king, while still being nailed to the cross.

In this image, the King of the Universe crucifix, the essence of Jesus's exchange with Pilate is presented. "Then you are a king?" Pilate asks. Jesus's answer to this is both "yes" and "no." Jesus is a king, The King, and the King of the Universe crucifix makes this point by depicting Jesus in royal raiments suitable for an earthly king's audience of state. But he's not a king as Pilate thinks of a king. Jesus isn't a political or military leader; he doesn't hold the orb or the scepter that would represent his authority in these realms. Nor is he seated on a throne, the recognizable prerogative of a ruler. Rather he is nailed to a cross. Still elevated, above the people, so that he can be more easily seen. But not privileged, seated and comfortable while those who seek an audience are standing. The earthly trappings of kingship are either missing or turned on their head. Jesus's "kingdom does not belong to this world." It is nothing like what Pilate would understand, nothing like what the Jewish rulers who turned Jesus over to Pilate would understand. To say Jesus is "a king" is in the ways they would have understood it not true. He is "The King," the one who has no equal, who rules over all, not politically, but spiritually, existentially really, as their Creator and Savior. But he is not "a king," an earthly ruler concerned with his own prestige and position relative to the other rulers of the Earth.

So what is Jesus's Kingdom? If it's "not here" then where is it? The Book of Revelation reminds us of the answer to those questions today: we are the Kingdom. By his blood, by his redemptive action on the cross, Christ "has made us into a kingdom," his kingdom. By gathering here together we instantiate the Kingdom of God in this place. Not because we have conquered it, taken this plot of land away from the United States and turned it over to Jesus, but because the Kingdom of God is among us and everywhere where two or three are gathered

in his name, there Christ the King can be found. Jesus's Kingdom is based on love. He loved us to make us into his Kingdom. When we love each other, his Kingdom is made present in the world. By sharing that love with others we show that Kingdom to them, even to those who fight against it, who call that Kingdom a dream, a bubble, and try to burst it. All peoples, all nations, all languages may be destined to serve Jesus the King, but we are the agents of the Kingdom by which that comes about.

Just as earthly kings have their attendants, their armies, to promote and pursue their interests, so too does Jesus the King of the Universe have his attendants who promote and pursue his interests, us. But where the attendants, the armies, of the earthly kings use violence in their pursuit, we are called to imitate Jesus who used love to establish his Kingdom. "Love one another as I have loved you." "This is how they shall know that you are my disciples: if you love one another." "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you." The weapon of Christ's Kingdom is both singular and manifold: it is love.

Jesus is a king like no other: The King of the Universe. As we celebrate that truth today, do we give witness to that fact with our lives the way he gave witness to it with his?