

Homily for Christ the King

I don't know if you've thought about it recently, but our country has really gone to the birds. Look at this way: On Thanksgiving Day, we gather together and give thanks for all the blessings God has given to us, and then we eat the Turkey. Then maybe we watch some TV, and perhaps the Eagles and the Ravens are playing football – although this year I think they have the day off! And then the next day, we go out on Black Friday, and start spending all our hard-earned money, which is decorated with the Bald Eagles all over it. So, I think I can safely say that America has gone to the birds.

And, it's been that way from the beginning. All the way back in 1782, about 160 years after the first Thanksgiving dinner took place in Plymouth Colony, the United States Congress met to discuss the foundations of this new nation. One of the items on the agenda was the need for a national seal. A lot of different ones were proposed. But in the end, it came down to two birds: the Turkey and the Bald Eagle. Some, like Benjamin Franklin, argued for the Turkey, because it was a more “respectable” bird of courage, although a little “vain and silly” looking. Others, on the other hand, thought that an eagle should be the national emblem, particularly the Bald Eagle, because it was the only eagle unique to North America. And in the end... the Bald Eagle became our national bird.

Now, those are the “official” reasons. But several years ago I heard another story as to why the Bald Eagle was chosen. You see, in the days before the American Revolution, our nation was still under the rule of the British crown. And so, after the war was won, and freedom achieved, the Founding Fathers chose that bird, which wore no crown upon its head – to symbolize our democracy and our liberation from the King of England.

And so, as Americans, isn't it then kind of just in our blood to be opposed to kings and queens and people like that? Isn't it part of our national history to seek freedom from monarchies? Aren't kings and queens just fairytale characters? It's hard for us to get a handle on just what a king is and just what a king does.

But it seems like people before us have struggled with this same concept – of kings. Just look at the Gospel reading today from St. Luke. There, we hear the soldier's hurtful words, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself." This calls to mind the sign that would eventually be hanging above Jesus' head on the cross: "This is the King of the Jews." And then we even hear about this King's encounter with those two criminals hanging at His side.

Everyone in this story seemed to struggle with how Jesus could possibly be a King. As Jews, they remembered the story of King David – as we heard in the first reading – who was so powerful. He united the 12 divided tribes of Israel under one kingdom. He ruled that nation from his city in Jerusalem. And they looked forward to God's promise of sending another king – a Messiah – even more powerful than David. And then they looked at Jesus – that supposed king – hanging on the cross, and they wondered, how can this be our king? The soldiers, the Pharisees, many of the people.

But, then there were those, like the repentant thief we also hear about in today's Gospel, who were able to see the real truth. That thief, traditionally given the name, St. Dismas, saw the reality of Jesus' weakness and humanity. But he also had the faith to believe that Jesus' kingly glory would somehow be revealed. And for this, Jesus promised Dismas that He would remember Him when He at last conquered death and entered into His Kingdom. From this, we see that "no one is beyond the reach of God's mercy. It is never too late to turn to Christ and ask for your sins to be forgiven. And the Jubilee Year of Mercy, which comes to an end today, has been a chance to emphasize and rediscover the power of God's mercy to turn sinners into saints."

And so here we are my brothers and sisters, thousands of years later, at the end of Ordinary Time, celebrating the Feast of Christ the King. And like Dismas, we also look to that time when Jesus' will come again in glory. We might not always "get" kings. We might not always understand how Jesus is our king. But He is a ruler we never need to depose, for this greatest of Kings has humbled Himself – becoming one of us out of pure love. We might struggle with believing how such a King could allow tragedy and brokenness in the world. But, today we take comfort in Jesus' words that He will return – and that He will bring to fulfillment that peace and justice we deeply yearn for. God bless you.