**Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ the King/34th & Last Sunday of Year/Closing of the Jubilee Year of Mercy**

November 20, 2016 11:30 a.m. St. Augustine Cathedral

Today we celebrate not only this Solemnity of Christ the King of the Universe and, hopefully, the King of each of our hearts, and the closing of another Church Year, but we also conclude this Jubilee Year of Mercy, which began last year on the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

While we don’t live in a monarchy and are unfamiliar with the trappings of royalty as perhaps people in Britain and other parts of the world who do have Kings or Queens to rule over them might have, we’re familiar with what could be considered to be the counterparts of royalty in our life experience: Hollywood celebrities; Billionaire business persons; Sports Hall of Fame members; perhaps even Coach Fleck and our undefeated Western Michigan Broncos!---those who attract the attention and the adulation of unrelenting paparazzi, cheering crowds and adoring fans.

While that may be the way “the world” understands what it means to be a King---lording it over others and being set apart from others---Jesus has come to establish a Kingdom that is far different than any worldly kingdom, and He is proclaimed the King of the Universe for far different reasons and because of a totally different understanding of “power” and “lordship” than that of “the world”. What more dramatic way of emphasizing that than by the Gospel passage we just heard proclaimed.

St. Luke graphically describes the scene of the Crucifixion. Jesus is at His darkest, weakest, and most powerless moment, humanly speaking. He had already been arrested, beaten mercilessly, and forced to carry His own cross to Calvary through the busy streets of Jerusalem, and now He is crucified on that same Cross between two convicted common criminals. He has no throne; only a cross. He has no gold crown, but rather a crown of thorns. He has no luxurious clothing; in fact He has been stripped half naked. He wears no shiny rings or jewelry; instead, His hands and feet are pierced with nails. He appears more to be conquered than to be the Conqueror.

But that should be no surprise to us. Jesus said many times: “*My Kingdom is not of this world.”* In fact, Jesus’ Kingdom can only take root in the hearts of those of us who choose to be His followers----those who pray with faith: “Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven.” That’s why we heard St. Paul in today’s Second Reading so beautifully writing to the Colossians that Our Father delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the Kingdom of His beloved Son in Whom we find redemption and forgiveness.

The “power” of Jesus’ Kingship is not power as the world defines it, but the power of absolute and unconditional love. The Son of God set aside His seat at the right Hand of the Father to come among us---to take on our human nature----to be immersed in our human experience----to live the joys and the miseries of human life.

Jesus did not come to condemn us (as we might deserve were it not for God’s Mercy); He did not come to forcibly conquer us; nor did He disregard our freedom, but whatever our choice is----to embrace His gift of salvation or not----He conquered humanity’s worst enemies: Evil personified in the Devil, as well as fear, sin and death. Jesus’ “power” that makes Him King of the Universe is also that which is the very essence and nature of God----the “power” of absolute and unconditional love, a humble love (as St. Paul so beautifully wrote) that bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things and forgives all things.

However we have to do more than believe that Jesus is the King of the Universe. That would be an empty belief if we do not also open our hearts to allow Jesus to be the King---the Lord---of our lives. And that also means that we need to embrace Jesus’ “way” of being King----the use of Jesus’ kind of “power” in the way we relate with one another, that is, the power of humble, sacrificial love.

Today’s powerful Gospel passage also gives us some insight into that. Again, let’s picture that scene as St. Luke describes it. We heard St. Luke tells us about three groups of people: the rulers, the soldiers and the two criminals, crucified on either side of Jesus. The rulers “*sneered”* at Jesus…..the soldiers “*jeered”* at Jesus….the one criminal *“reviled”* Jesus. And all three of them, personified mostly in the one criminal, mockingly said: “Hey, Jesus, you saved others; why don’t you save yourself----and me too while you’re at it!”

If that sounds familiar, that’s because that’s exactly what the Devil tried to tempt Jesus to do three years earlier at the very beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. Remember that powerful passage that we hear every year at the beginning of the Lenten season: Jesus goes out to the desert for 40 days and nights to pray in union with His Father. At the end of that time, the Devil comes lurking around trying to get to what he thought would be Jesus’ vulnerabilities---that He’d be hungry, tired, and perhaps not so sure that He wanted to do what had become very clear would be required of Him in order to save Humanity---that He would have to suffer and die. The Devil’s temptations at that time were all aimed at forgetting about the mission to save others, and simply save Himself---to turn His back on the Cross that awaited Him, and find the easy way out by submitting Himself to the Devil.

The rulers, soldiers and the criminal were doing the same thing: Save yourself. Come down from that cross. Put an end to this mission. It’s still not too late to turn to the easy way out---the way of sin and selfishness. Those sneers, jeers, and revilements are a direct attack on the “power” of unconditional and sacrificial love. These people were doing the work of the Devil, and this is the worst temptation possible---the first and the last of the Gospel. Jesus does not respond; he simply remains faithful and Loves.

But then the “hero” of this scene weighs in----the Good Thief, the one history remembers by name, Dismas---He turns to Jesus, acknowledges Who He is as King, and pleads for mercy in those beautiful words: “*Jesus, remember me, when you come into Your Kingdom; Jesus remember me, when You come into Your Kingdom.”* And Jesus, in the midst of His awful human suffering, among His last words before dying, promises Dismas: “*Amen, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”*

My sisters and brothers in Christ our King, this dangerous temptation that began and concluded Jesus’ earthly life is a major temptation that we too have to struggle to overcome. That temptation comes to us in many different guises and forms. How often are we tempted to reject the Cross in our lives and seek out the comforts and luxuries of the world? The lure of human power, worldly success, fame and wealth may seem much more attractive at times than following the Commandments, embracing the Beatitudes, and living joyfully with Gospel values in a world that is unfriendly at best, and more antagonistic and adversarial than anything else---more sneers, jeers and revilement than cheers, support and agreement.

This Year of Mercy has reminded each of us what is most important and essential in our lives-----it is being able to look at the Face of Jesus, and there, as Pope Francis so beautifully wrote in calling for the Year of Mercy, we will see the Mercy of the Father. As we think about the crucified Christ the King---the King of unconditional Love and Mercy---we also see the true Face of the King, the One that shines out three days after this on Easter, as the One Who is victorious over sin and death, and see there the Face of the Church Jesus established, where all people are welcomed to come and find the Mercy that our Loving God so desperately wants us to have.

Just as Jesus extended Mercy to Dismas and promised him eternal life, He wants to give us that same mercy, and make that same promise. But we have to ask----we have to come to Jesus to see Him as our King and to seek after His love and mercy----we have to be aware of our sins, our failings, and our needs, and know that Jesus still loves us and wants us to be one with Him.

Today the Year of Mercy comes to a close, and Pope Francis has closed the Holy Door in St. Peter Basilica in Rome, as we did here in our Cathedral last week. But the “doorway” to Jesus’ love and mercy never closes. We need to come to Jesus for that mercy regularly. Once we have experienced mercy, we are called to be “agents of that Mercy” to others, and to use the “power” of Christ our King to forgive others, to reconcile differences among us, and to right the wrongs that we find in our world to the best of our ability.

Once more as we reflect on this powerful scene of Jesus dying on the Cross for us, let us remember that Jesus’ Mother, Mary, the Mother of Mercy, stood faithfully at the foot of the Cross, and having taken the beloved disciple as her own Son, she too takes each of us under her Mantle to be our spiritual Mother. Let us stay close to our Mother of Mercy, who will always keep us close to her Son, our Lord and Savior, Christ the King of the Universe and the King of our hearts.

God bless you, now and always!