

SOLEMNITY OF CHRIST THE KING, DE SALES CONGRESS, ROME, 20 November 2022

We celebrate the solemnity of Christ the King. Christ is King.

But the whole question is, what kind of king?

Our imagination immediately imposes itself, with received images of kings, presidents, leaders of nations, with their power and their glory.

It is true that Christ is the ALPHA, the firstborn of all creation.

He is the firstborn also of those risen from the dead.

He is also the OMEGA. In him, all things are destined to be reconciled, in a splendid vision of final harmony.

But it is equally true that, though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, becoming like us in all things, even unto death on a cross.

It is only after death that he is exalted above all things, that every knee in heaven and on earth bows before him.

So it is not enough to acclaim Christ as King.

We are called to follow him, to be like him, to put on his mind, the mind that was in Christ Jesus.

We are called not only to follow him but to become like him. This is the adventure of our lives, this is our high goal and destiny: to be reconciled in him with the Father and with all peoples and all things.

This is a journey from ambiguity to clarity.

It is a journey that is reflected in so many of the great figures of the Old and New Testaments.

I am particularly fascinated with the figure of the patriarch Jacob.

Jacob is what you might call a "common crook."

He was born crooked, grasping the heel of his brother and trying to supplant him as the firstborn.

He grows up crooked, with the help of Rachel! – gaining the birthright from Esau for a plate of lentils, and then cheating him also of the blessing of their father Isaac.

With Rachel's help, again, he escapes far away, to her brother Laban.

On the way he has the magnificent vision—theophany of Bethel. But despite this encounter with God, the ambiguity remains. He is welcomed and sheltered by Laban his uncle, but still he becomes rich at the expense of Laban.

When things become too hot to stay on, he decides to return home, but he knows he has to cross the territory of his brother Esau.

Here again he shows himself the great manager and shrewd leader. At the ford of the Jabbok, he sends first the concubines and their children, then Leah and her children, and only then the beloved Rachel and Joseph, and an endless procession of gifts to placate the wrath of Esau.

At this moment there occurs something unexpected. Jacob, left alone on one side of the Jabbok, is attacked by Someone. Ambiguity is built into the scene. We are not sure who is attacking whom, and who is winning. At one point the Someone, seeing that he cannot get the better of Jacob, strikes him on his hip. But still Jacob will not let go, he demands to know the name of the stranger, he wants a blessing.

Yet in the end it is Jacob who gives his name. he surrenders. He is Ya'acob, the one who grasped the heel of his brother, the cheater, deceiver, supplanter. He finally admits the truth of himself, the ambiguity of his being. He stands naked before God. And now he receives a new name: he is no longer Ya'acob but Israel, "God wins." He is the winner who is the loser, he is the loser who is the winner. He is the winner who weeps and seeks favour. (Hos 12:4)

Jacob is a truly remarkable figure because, great patriarch that he is, he is presented in the full ambiguity of his being. He is not one of the pious, honest, virtuous, believing elite. He is like everyone else, he is one of us. Like Jacob, we are called to recognize the ambiguity of our being, and to surrender that ambiguity to the Lord who has called us, the Lord who is king.

Like Jacob, we might have had our own initial powerful experience of God, and yet, like him, we might have to look clearly at the ambiguity of our lives, to name it, to surrender it, to make our daily decisions.

We have to learn to let go of total control of our lives. Jacob the great manager has to learn to surrender control, and only then, he is the loser who is the winner.

Like Jacob, also, we are reminded that there is no private relationship with God. After the encounter and the struggle with the angel, Jacob has to go forward and meet his brother Esau who he has cheated. The scene is truly moving, and perhaps the one who really comes out well is Esau, the one who forgives and extends the hand of reconciliation. The encounter with God has to pass through the test of forgiveness, reconciliation, fraternity, communion. there is no private spirituality. The Love of God and the love of human beings, in one great movement of love.

On this feast of Christ the King, then, we are called on a journey from ambiguity to clarity and surrender, discipleship and configuration. We are called not only to acclaim but to put on the mind of Christ who though he was in the form of God, emptied himself, became obedient even unto death on a cross. This is the King that we acclaim and follow. We ask the help and prayers of the great communion of saints, beginning from Mary our Mother and Teacher, St Joseph her humble and silent spouse, St Francis de Sales, St John Bosco...
