

This is the final edition of GoodNews4You. Please enjoy the following reflection first run in 2018. Many thanks for reflecting with me on the Sunday Scriptures and your ongoing desire to hear God's holy word!

## Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, Cycle B

Daniel 7:13-14, Revelation 1:5-8 & John 18:33b-37

Have you ever visited a Greek Orthodox church? The interior surrounds you with gold and icons of the saints. They are arranged according to increasing importance to move you from this world into the Kingdom of God. The holiness builds until, on the wall behind the altar, you meet a huge icon of the Pantocrator, a Greek title for Jesus meaning the Almighty. He usually looks stern and fierce to convey the awesome power he wields.

This architectural experience makes concrete (pun intended) the reality of what we celebrate this final Sunday of the Church year. We may be so comfortable with Jesus as our companion or friend that we forget how transcendent he is. It is sort of like living with a superhero and not knowing it. So this Sunday, he dons his super suit and we gaze in awe at Jesus, our Lord and King of the Universe.

The first two readings paint Jesus in the same style as the Greek Orthodox churches do. Both readings are in the apocalyptic style, so they use vivid imagery and symbolism to convey the message that, no matter what terrible things we are going through now, God and goodness will win completely in the long run. Daniel uses a human being to represent the reign of God, in contrast to the reign of evil kings who are represented by animals. The idea is that God's reign will be more noble, compassionate and intelligent, just as humans are when compared to animals. Early Christians co-opted this imagery for their own purposes, as we can see in Revelation. Once again, God has power that trumps all other powers. Now however, the person in the clouds is Jesus. Notice the beautiful titles he is given in the first verse of our reading: he is the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth. Scripture scholar PHEME PERKINS says this tidy statement was probably Christian shorthand for all a disciple needed to know about Christ: he suffered and died for the truth, his resurrection saves us all from death and he is the ultimate ruler. Lest we continue to admire anyone or anything else, Jesus tells us, "I am the Alpha and the Omega ... the one who is and who was and who is to come, the pantocrator."

While this may seem so grand that we can only stand agog and immobile, John's gospel shows us how to use Jesus' power in our daily lives. Pilate has had many opportunities to know about Jesus' awesome power, but he has not. Now Jesus stands before him and Pilate must decide whether Jesus lives or dies. Pilate asks seemingly sincere questions. So Jesus says he is a faithful witness to the truth; in this, Jesus invites Pilate to also be a witness to the truth. As we know, however, Pilate caves to political pressure and orders Jesus' death. Pilate cannot see beyond the fleeting, immediate power of human politics to the greater, lasting power embodied in Jesus.

We are faced daily with decisions like Pilate's. We have the power to decide the life or death of so many of our fellow human beings. We pooh-pooh our daily choices as unimportant, yet they impact the refugee, the criminal, the unborn, the mentally ill, the poor and our grandchildren. We will make our decision in light of the power we respect the most. Who is that power and what does it encourage us to do? Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, does not value destruction or self-promotion, but rather compassion, love, humility and self-sacrifice. The truth is that these seemingly ineffective and weak tools are the most powerful and lasting values in the universe. Do we believe this? Do we live like we do?

When Jesus stood before Pilate, he appeared to be lowly, dirty and beat up, yet he testified to the truth with his very existence. Pilate, in his cynicism, failed to recognize the invitation of the Pantocrator to love, humbly and at great self-cost. The Pantocrator stands before us today in lowly, dirty, beat up human beings and offers us the same opportunity to save lives with love, the greatest and most enduring power in the universe.

- ❖ In what parts of your life do you tend to be cynical? How does cynicism hold you back from acting in a loving way?
- ❖ Where did you see love triumph this past week? What does it inspire you to do this next week?

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