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A King's Ransom

By Rev. Msgr. Kevin T. Hart

As citizens of a nation that never had a king or any trappings of royalty in our government, to call Christ our King as we do in today's Liturgy (John 18:33b-37) is not something that trips easily off our lips. The word "king" conjures up images that are difficult to associate with Christ: wealth, crowns and scepters, gilded carriages, capricious exercise of power, and a rather lavish life-style. There is one phrase, however, which, while associated with royalty and great wealth, seems particularly appropriate to Jesus, especially in the context of today's Gospel: "a king's ransom."

To be worth "a king's ransom" means that something is so expensive or so valuable that it is really beyond price. The phrase has its roots in the capture of a king by enemy forces. Rather than just kill the king, the captors would ask for a ransom, usually one that would drain the financial resources of the kingdom. For what could be more valuable to the kingdom than the return of their king. Today's Gospel account from St. John could easily be subtitled, "A King's Ransom," not in the sense that Jesus, as King, is Himself being ransomed, but that He is about to pay an invaluable ransom for us. He will give His own life in exchange for ours. He will die on the cross so that we may be ransomed from sin and death.

Today's Gospel focuses on the face-off between Pilate and Jesus following His arrest. Their exchange is subtle and nuanced. In all of the Gospel accounts of this incident, the first words of Pilate to Jesus are the point-blank question, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus avoids a point-blank answer because Pilate is speaking about kingship in the worldly sense. For Jesus, however, His kingdom does not belong to this world. Their exchange takes place on Good Friday morning. In a few hours, Jesus will be dead, but His dying and resurrection three days later will confirm the kind of King He is.

Recall that Jesus was not crucified alone, but with two other convicts. We usually refer to them as "thieves," but the Gospels simply call them criminals. We don't know what crime they committed, only that whatever they had done was deemed worthy of capital punishment. The first criminal to speak is thinking only of himself: "If you are the King of the Jews, then save yourself and us." The second thinks, not of himself, but only of Jesus, bemoaning the fact that the innocent Jesus was forced to share in the same death sentence that true criminals deserve. Hanging on a cross as well, this criminal has no chance to reform his life, no opportunity to cease whatever criminal activity placed him there. He can do nothing. He doesn't even presume to ask forgiveness. He simply asks that Jesus "remember him when He comes into His kingdom." And Jesus responds to this all-too-imperfect act of contrition by promising that he will be with Him in paradise that very day, a

promise of sure and immediate salvation that Jesus never in the Gospels gives to those far more righteous than this criminal.

The Gospels' avoidance of ascribing any specific sin to this criminal underscores the fact that we all have something in common with that criminal. Not just because we are sinful, weak, or unable to change our lives, but also because Jesus loves us no less than He loves that "good thief." For most of us the sins we confess are usually the same sins we confess over and over again. Our "firm purpose of amendment" is usually rather fleeting. But Jesus' resolve to love us and to forgive us is always firm and unconditional. Evidently, Jesus saw something very good in His death-mate, something that He must see in you and me.

It might be good for each of us to meditate on a little question that carries huge consequences: What does Jesus see in me, in spite of all my sins, in spite of all failed resolves to change my life that makes me, in His eyes, worth a King's ransom?

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