

The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe (Year B)
November 20-21, 2021
Readings: Daniel 7:13-14; Revelation 1:5-8; John 18:33-37

Recently, while on a three-hour return drive from my brother's cabin through rural northern Wisconsin, my appreciation for satellite radio spiked. You see, radio stations are few and far between. My mother and I were delighted that the Symphony channel was airing the entirety of Gustav Holst's World War I era orchestral suite entitled *The Planets*.¹ It is comprised of seven movements, one for each planet other than Earth. As Pluto was not yet "discovered" until 1930, no movement bears its name.

However, three minutes into the fourth movement- Jupiter- one instantly recognizes a melody from Archdiocesan liturgies. Holst's melody bears the hymn tune name THAXTED- after the village where he lived. The powerful lyrics, composed by Anglican canon Michael Perry in 1982, complement the stately melody. Later, an additional stanza was added at the request of Catholic composer Richard Proulx.

Today, we are blessed to hear the U.S. premier of a new arrangement of this work commissioned in honor of Stephen Cleobury, the longtime director of the world-renowned choir of King's College, Cambridge. It is thus appropriate, even if coincidental, that a symphony named in honor of the planets and set to lyrics nearly 70 years later, should make its way to us on the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe!

A solemnity bearing such a majestic title beckons us to think on a large scale. Verse 3 is especially appropriate for today: "Then hear, O gracious Savior, accept the love we bring, that we who know your favor may serve you as our king." It is not commonplace in 2021 to speak of serving kings. Something about it sounds anachronistic. If we align with contemporary culture, haven't we all been liberated from the shackles of authority?

¹ British composer Gustav Theodore Holst (1874-1934). *The Planets*, Op. 32 suite was composed between 1914 and 1916.

Or in heeding the words of a 19th c. British poet, “I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul,”² we easily conclude that such servitude has no standing in our day. Yet, if we believe in our hearts that God is indeed beyond all praising, greater than anything we can possibly imagine, how could we not desire to serve Him?

And what does it mean to serve Him? The word ought not connote an obsequious servility that shuts down our free will. When we serve God, we do so in radical freedom, following a conscious choice to follow wherever the Lord leads us and to serve His will, not ours. Why is this? In short, because we trust Jesus Christ, our King. We exercise our personal freedom most fully in obedience to the saving promises of Jesus, believing that “everyone who belongs to the truth” listens to his voice.

Our prophecy from Daniel teaches that God’s “kingship shall not be destroyed.” Human history points in an entirely different direction with human monarchies. Austria, Brazil, France, Greece, Mexico, Iraq, Nepal, Vietnam to name but several of many- none has a monarch today. Other forms of government replaced those, with varied results to be sure.

And our faith can be lived authentically in any number of forms of government, provided both the proper degree of freedom is afforded to believers and that we as His subjects keep our priorities straight.

“I am the alpha and the omega, the one who is and who was and who is to come, the almighty.” With these words in our second reading, the Lord God spoke of His tremendous power and majesty. This is only one of two passages in the book of Revelation in which God Himself is identified as the speaker. Revelation took its cue from the Old Testament Book of Daniel, itself having been written to strengthen people’s resolve against persecution from a foreign ruler intent on abolishing their Jewish customs. The danger of apostasy was great.

² *Invictus*, by William Ernest Henley, 1875.

False prophets went about, trying to seduce the people to conform to heathen practices. The Seer urges the people to remain true to their faith and to bear their troubles with fortitude. The vision reassures the people that the dominion of the “Son of man” will endure.

But “when” this would happen became the question, and still is today. We deeply desire to usher in the fullness of the Kingdom now, to heal, to save, to bring about a more just and loving world. Why does God make us wait? Perhaps one answer lies in the lyrics of the hymn itself.

Whenever we patiently and trustingly wait upon the Lord’s Word, we honor and adore our great and mighty Lord. He is a gracious Savior, not a domineering overlord. God’s graciousness invites to act in accordance with the qualities we see in Jesus, and which are rightly highlighted today.

Christ’s Kingship is one of service, with a keen eye to those spiritually and materially poor, those who have strayed, those who have fallen. It is a service towards our most treasured generation, our seniors who have given so much of themselves and who today may feel especially isolated.

But be under no illusions—serving Christ as our King is a daunting task requiring daily commitment to live our faith with authenticity. To bring about His Kingdom demands more than a passing nod to the heavens.

As we conclude the Church’s liturgical year, we would be wise to ponder our attitudes towards serving Christ as King, and to the role we play in bringing about a more just and loving Kingdom, right here on earth.