

Homily, the Solemnity of Christ the King, Year C,
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Christ the King and Showing No Weakness

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Some of you here have probably already heard me talk about how much I really did not like high school- I simply did not find it to be a very pleasant experience. And I don't think that I'm the only one- it's often a rather tough time in life for many people for a variety of reasons.

It's not completely useless though- the dynamics at play in those years of high school can be very revealing about human nature. What we love, what we fear, what we need, who we give our allegiance to and why.

Really, on a very basic level, high school is all about power- it's all about the phrase "show no weakness." Which means it's really all about- *who is king*.

That frightening awareness of the necessity to show no weakness plays itself out in a variety of ways: how you dress, who you walk and sit with it, who you date and what you do on dates. How you view the administration and staff, how you view your parents. And- how you treat the weakest members of the pack. All of this is fascinating to watch.

As a student, I eventually figured out that the kids who often acted the toughest, talked the loudest, acted out the most, were the most cynical, tried to be the most striking or deliberately odd—they were really the weakest of all.

True- by conventional standards of power they were untouchable. They were big, tough, bold, popular, attractive, etc, etc. But they, the kings and queens of the school, were really very weak and were very afraid.

They were afraid of a few things: of not having a comeback or an answer- of being mocked or ridiculed beyond the repair of their image. They were afraid of being rejected. They were afraid of being discovered. They were afraid of being wrong about themselves- of realizing that their power was built on nothing but appearances and shifting realities.

And, they were afraid of the kids who weren't afraid of them- who weren't impressed or phased by them- the ones they couldn't categorize or manipulate or intimidate- the one's who didn't play the game.

There are always a few of these types in every group- the ones who are truly powerful because they are confident in a far different set of realities than everyone else. So they don't play the game. They move through life without raising trouble or drawing attention- but everyone notices them. They are the terrifying ones- they have the real power. They are the ones who truly show no weakness and in the process, they expose everyone else's. They are people that others simply

must react to- they force a choice, challenge convictions, cut through appearances, test allegiances.

So- that's high school. And these same dynamics are at work in the Gospel for today and in the Solemn Feast of Christ the King, where we find Jesus as the unlikely strong party who forces the world to make a choice. He brings new meaning to the phrase: "show no weakness."

As Jesus is presented here, he is a very unlikely king, isn't he? He lets himself be mocked, insulted, ridiculed, abused, scorned. He is the one who would probably have "kick me" taped to the back of his shirt.

He is a king who lets himself be rejected. The crowds made it obvious that they believed him to be a total failure, a traitor, a false prophet, or something worse. He did not fit into their system of reality.

He is a king who lets himself be crucified. This is utter defenselessness, no? Powerlessness. A king who seemed to epitomize weakness- which means he is not a king at all based on the standards of the world.

As if those facts alone were not strange enough, St. Luke presents us with this fascinating scene and exchange between Jesus and the two criminals crucified on either side of him- tradition refers to them as Dismas and Gismas. There they are, all three of them, nailed to a cross. By external appearances they are all failures: equally rejected, powerless, weak- in serious trouble.

But that's actually not the case. One of the three is clearly very intimidating, even in this state— they are afraid of Jesus. The bad thief, Gismas, takes a swipe at him even though he is clearly in no position to do so- it's almost comical to watch someone so helpless try to be tough. But he thought he couldn't show any weakness- when you mistakenly think everyone is as weak as you are, then you swing away at the rest of humanity. But that is not being strong.

The good thief, Dismas, takes another approach. He too is helpless, he too needs redemption, he too is weak. But, unlike the bad thief, he sees in Jesus the true power- he sees him as the king he really is, and, more importantly, he is not afraid to admit it. And he does the mature thing, the strong thing- he asks for help from the only one of the three of them who obviously has something figured out. The one who is not interested in playing the game because he doesn't need to. The one who can save others by freely choosing NOT to save himself. And Christ, as King, grants him a share in his own reign, from his throne of the cross.

This Gospel and this feast totally re-define conventional notions of "show no weakness." The problem with high school, and with the other sectors of the world that believe in the "show no weakness" philosophy, is that they operate on two very grave doubts.

For one, such people who believe that power consists ONLY of intimidation often doubt that they are loved, or can ever be loved. And two, they doubt that anyone or anything other than themselves can help them with this problem. That often makes them all very insecure. And that makes them grab onto empty gestures of power and strength to try and get through life.

The quietly strong ones, on the other hand, are held up by love and by the hope of growing in love with the help of other people and of God. They don't need the games and empty gestures.

The reason why Jesus could be mocked, ridiculed, rejected, tortured and killed was because he was so firmly convinced of the Father's love- he knew it as the Son. He was powerless by earthly standards, but he reigned as supreme king and Lord by the standard and the law of love.

So on Calvary we see the stage of the world and of all of human history. In the middle, at center stage, is Jesus who is so full of the Father's love that he sheds all earthly power- God himself makes himself the lowest of the lowest. And he therefore reigns supreme.

On one side of him, with the bad thief, are all those who say: "I don't need God, I can take care of myself." Those who live by intimidation, fear, shallow standards of achievement, appearances, those caught up in what's on the surface or the passing images of the day. Those caught up in themselves alone. Those who think "show no weakness" means relying purely on themselves even though that is not really possible (for any of us).

They are those who claim there is no truth, those who retreat into cynicism and atheism and the spineless middle ground of non-commitment. Those who attempt to show no weakness and end up showing how weak they really are. The helpless trying to look tough. Sort of like they never got out of high school.

In short- those who believe in their hearts that they are not really loved or love-able. God's love, the love of the true king, terrifies them. Rather than turn to him for help in learning to love, they retreat into the shallowness of themselves. Some of them may wind up kings by earthly standards, but their kingdoms will always pass away.

Maybe you know people like this- co-workers, bosses, fathers, cousins, teachers, students. Actually, to a certain extent we all have this streak in us- none of us truly understands the depths of the Father's love which leaves all of us thinking we are more important or worthy of attention than we truly are at various points in life. We are all very good at empty posturing once in awhile- we all retreat into the "show no weakness" mode of thinking.

On the other side of Jesus, down through history, are those who recognize how helpless they truly are, and who figure out that real power has its source *outside* of us- in the Father's love. They realize how deficient their love is, both of self and of others, but they don't seek the remedy to that on their own. They turn instead to the source of love. They seek to submit to the reign of Christ the King by embracing humility, patience, self-lessness, faith, ethics and the law of love. They see Christ's total trust, made so visible on the cross, and they know they want that too. Who cares about popularity, or about the foolishness of "showing no weakness." We call those people disciples- Christians.

And we all have that streak in us, too, don't we? Otherwise, why would we be here? Do we not all come here, like the good thief, nailed fast by our sin, no longer caring about showing

weakness but instead falling to our knees and saying “Jesus- remember me- have pity on me- save me from my own self-righteousness.”

Like those confident kids in high school who didn't play the game, Christ the King is the one who confidently strides into the world- into history- into life. His confidence has its source in the Father- it is not in himself. He trusts fully and totally in the love of the Father which allows him to set himself aside so that others may be helped and saved. Christ Jesus, the crucified one, is King and Lord. And he reigns supreme because he reigns in LOVE- that is true power.

He comes into the world, and the world around him has no choice but to react to him- every human in history, in some capacity, must make the decision about how to respond to the reality that Christ is King- it requires a choice. Everyone of us, everyone, finds himself on each side of Christ- we are all thrown into the position of being those two helpless criminals, forced to have a response.

Which group do you fall into? Which crowd? Which thief?

Everyone knows they are powerless next to him. The question is: who is weak enough, or strong enough, to admit it?