Three Crosses

Reign of Christ

November 24th, 2019

*The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news!* (Mark 1:15). These are the first words that we hear from Jesus of Nazareth in the Gospel of Mark. The kingdom of God has come near. And yet, there is no revolution, no assumption of a throne, no victorious army parading down the streets of Jerusalem. Instead, the gospel leads us to the Place of the Skull, to a travesty of a coronation, a mockery of the one who proclaimed the kingdom, and further taunts as he hangs on the cross: *Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe* (Mark 15:32). The cross reveals the ultimate difference between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light. In the kingdom of darkness, the ultimate quest is for power. In the kingdom of God, the ultimate quest is for the love of God and others. Today is the day known as the Christ the King Sunday, or the Reign of Christ, a day set aside by Pope Pius XI in 1925. The day is also observed in many Protestant Churches and Orthodox Churches in the West. Pius XI set up the day as a response to growing secularism and nationalism, something that is still of concern to many people today. In the encyclical that established this day, he writes: “"If to Christ our Lord is given all power in heaven and on earth; if all men, purchased by his precious blood, are by a new right subjected to his dominion; if this power embraces all men, it must be clear that not one of our faculties is exempt from his empire. He must reign in our minds, which should assent with perfect submission and firm belief to revealed truths and to the doctrines of Christ. He must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God. He must reign in our hearts, which should spurn natural desires and love God above all things, and cleave to him alone. He must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments for the interior sanctification of our souls, or to use the words of the Apostle Paul, as instruments of justice unto God” (*Quas primas*, 33, Libreria Editrice Vaticana). As we read in the lectionary from the Gospel of Luke today: “When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.’ And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!’ The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, ‘If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!’ There was also an inscription over him, ‘This is the King of the Jews.’ One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’” (Luke 23:33-43).

That a God could become a man or a man could become a god was not especially shocking or difficult for the Romans or other nations of the 1st Century. Logically speaking, it should not be that shocking for us. Religious matters deal with things beyond the power of human reasoning, though reason may lead us to their frontier. It was not shocking for the Jews that a prophet should be wrongfully put to death, either. Such was the fate of Zechariah the son of Berechiah; such was the case of John the Baptist. What shocked the Judeans and Galileans was that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. What shocked the Romans, and the Jews, and what has shocked many for the past twenty centuries, is the fact that the Messianic claimant, the King of Kings, came in quiet, in weakness, in selflessness, even to the point of grim suffering. Thus, Tom Holland writes in the preface to his new book, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*: “That a man who had himself been crucified might be hailed as a god could not help but be seen by people everywhere across the Roman world as scandalous, obscene, grotesque…Even those who did come to acknowledge Jesus as *‘Christos’,* the Anointed One of the Lord God, might flinch at staring the manner of his death full in the face. ‘Christians,’ as they were called, were as wise to the connotations of crucifixion as anyone…There was certainly no lack of Christians in medieval Europe to identify with the sufferings of their God. Rich still trampled down poor. Gibbets stood on hills. The Church itself, thanks in a large part to the exertions of men like Anselm, was able to lay claim to the ancient primacy of Rome—and uphold it, what is more. And yet, for all that, something fundamental had indeed changed. ‘Patience in tribulation, offering the other cheek, praying for one’s enemies, loving those who hate us’: such were the Christian virtues as defined by Anselm. All derived from the recorded sayings of Jesus himself. No Christian, then, not even the most callous and unheeding, could ignore them without some measure of reproof from their consciences. That the Son of God, born of a woman, and sentenced to the death of a slave, had perished unrecognized by his judges, was a reflection fit to give pause to even the haughtiest monarch. This awareness, enshrined as it was in the very heart of medieval Christianity, could not help but lodge in its consciousness a visceral and momentous suspicion: that God was closer to the weak than to the mighty, to the poor than to the rich. Any beggar, any criminal, might be Christ. ‘So the last will be first, and the first last” (Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World.* 6-9).

The kingdom of darkness wants anything but the cross. For the cross will forever reveal the tragedy of human apostasy and the glory of divine faithfulness, the cruelty of human sin and the holiness of God’s love. The cross reminds us of the wisdom of God that is folly to us, the love of God that seems like the hours of darkness that fell across Golgotha when the Son of the Man died. To the extent that we hide the gospel or shy away from its claims, we will forget compassion, self-giving love, patience in tribulation, the virtues that Holland associates with the crucified Lord. To the extent that we cherry-pick our way through the living Word, we will forget the authoritative and holy lips that spoke life to the poor. Secularism and nationalism are only part of a greater picture of darkness—that is the kingdom of the world. And in this house there are many rooms for any other ideology or ontology one wishes to pursue, for in the end, all of these pursuits are pursuits of ourselves, our power, our dreams rather than the living reality of love. Whatever is not Christ-like, whatever does not come from the teaching of Christ, will inevitably lead to totalitarianism. As Jesus told his disciples: “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them…but among you it shall not be so. Rather, let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant…I am among you as the one who serves” (Luke 22:25-27). For decades, Albania was under the iron fist of Enver Hoxha, who attempted to stamp out faith and religion of all forms. He was especially inspired by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution that Mao Zedong had undertaken in China, and he wanted to proclaim Albania the first atheistic nation in the world. In 1946, the Jesuit order was banned; in 1947 the Franciscans were banned. The number of Catholic priests dropped from 300 to 30. In 1952, Archbishop Kristofor of the Orthodox church was found dead—believed by many to have been murdered. More than 2,000 churches and mosques were closed. 600 Orthodox churches were demolished. Hundreds of clergy were imprisoned and slaughtered. Hoxha was born in Gjirokastër, the same town into which was born the novelist who would write numerous works exposing the nature of totalitarianism—Ismail Kadare. In his novel *The Ghost Rider,* based on the medieval Albanian legend, “The Ballad of Constantine and Doruntine”, Kostandin rides to Bohemia to fulfill a promise to bring back his sister Doruntine to visit her mother, and they ride all night. The only problem is that Kostandin has been dead for three years. After delivering Doruntine to her mother, Kostandin vanishes. The whole realm is terrified, but the authorities, especially the church authorities, are scandalized. The captain who investigates the strange event is summoned to the Monastery of the Three Crosses to meet with an Archbishop who wants the whole story suppressed. Resurrections are not supposed to happen. Only Christ can rise from the dead, the Archbishop argues. This is not even a proper theological argument, since Christians believe they will also rise from death (Romans 8, 1 Corinthians 15), and the Gospels tell us that many rose from death during the passion of Christ (Matthew 27:45-54). The Archbishop is not afraid of the theological idea of resurrection. The Archbishop is afraid of the reality of resurrection; moreover he is afraid of this other living world that the commoners inhabit, a world of faith, folklore, legends, enchantment, otherworldly power and behaving in ways that threaten the establishment and the kingdom of this world. The secular kingdom of today likewise cannot grasp it or understand it; it cannot enter that celestial kingdom. As John says, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5); “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’” (John 3:8). In some sense, despite being a religious authority, the Archbishop represents the secular fear and reaction towards the kingdom of God. Incidentally, there was one woman who was not allowed to visit her family in Albania during the reign of Enver Hoxha because she was considered especially influential and dangerous. The most dangerous woman was named Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu, or Mother Teresa.

The kingdom of heaven is among us and within us (Luke 17:21). It is not of this world (John 18:36). It will never be conformed to this world because it is a kingdom that transforms us into the divine life of Christ himself, who gave everything for us. The English poet Geoffrey Hill locates our freedom at the edges, at the fringe of the world; he locates it in the *kenosis*, or outpouring of God Himself, writing: “Paul’s reinscription of the Kenotic Hymn—*God..made himself of no reputation..took…the shape of a servant—*that is our manusmission, Zion new-centred at the circumference” (“The Triumph of Love” CXLVI, *Selected Poems*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009. 196). Elsewhere, he writes: “Crucified Lord, so naked to the world, you live unseen within that nakedness” (“Lachrimae Antiquae Novae”, 103). Indeed, sometimes religiosity hides the very Christ that should be as freely shared as the bread we share with the poor, but we become like the Archbishop in Kadare’s novel, afraid that something we do not understand, control, desire or even ascribe to has the power to upset the kingdom we are building, the God we are fashioning after our own likeness. Before he was stoned to death, the first martyr of the church Stephen warned against resisting the Holy Spirit and suppressing the truth: “You are for ever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. You are the ones that received the law as ordained by angels, and yet you have not kept it.’” (Acts 7:51-53). Likewise, though we have received the kingdom of heaven and the grace of the gospel of God, we act as though Christ did not reign over our hearts, minds and souls, as if someone or something else is going to show greater grace, greater hope, greater wisdom and greater love to us. Yet, no one can serve two masters (Matthew 6:24).

Our kingdom began on a hill with three crosses. God died the death of a slave for us. And while he suffered this long, agonizing death, he proclaimed two things: “‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). In his death, he revealed the hope of life, the life of the other kingdom. Before his own disciples believed, before he had even risen, two people saw the king and the kingdom. The first was the thief, who said: “‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’” (Luke 23:42). The second was the centurion, who proclaimed: “‘Certainly this man was innocent.’” (Luke 23:47): “Truly, this man was God’s son!” (Mark 15:39). An executioner and one he had executed both found faith at the cross. They saw God and the reign of God in the suffering of the One who brought them together. And the other thing Jesus proclaimed in his death in our reading today should follow us each day. These words should accompany you when you wake up, when you work, when you go to sleep, for it is the hope of glory that overcomes the afflictions of this age and gives rise to thanksgiving; for Christ told the thief and to every believer: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’” (Luke 23:43).