

Stations of the Cross and Benediction

Jesus, King of Kings

5 April 2006

The Dream of the Rood (9th century)

"That was years gone by - I still remember -
that I was hewn down at the forest's edge,
cut out of my tree trunk. Strong foes took me there,
shaped me there for themselves in the form of a spectacle,
commanded me to raise their criminals.
Warriors carried me there on shoulders, until that they set me on a hill;
many foes fastened me there. I then saw mankind's Lord
hasten with great zeal; he wished to climb on me.
There I then darest not bow nor burst
contrary to the Lord's word when I saw earth's surface
trembling. I would have been able
to kill all foes but I stood firm.
The young hero stripped himself - that was God almighty -
strong and unflinching; he stepped up on the high cross,
brave in the sight of many, where he wished to redeem mankind.
I trembled when the Warrior embraced me;
nor did I dare, however, to bow down to the earth,
to fall to the surfaces of the earth. But I had to stand firm.
As a rood I was erected; I raised the powerful King,
the Lord of heavens; I dared not bow myself down.
They drove through me with iron-coloured and sinister nails:
on me the wounds are visible,
the open malicious wounds; neither dared I to injure any of them.
They mocked us two both together. I was completely stained with blood,
covered from the man's side after he had released his spirit.
I had endured on that hill
much of cruel fates. I saw the God of hosts
severely stretched out. Shades of night had
covered with clouds the Lord's corpse,
the bright radiance; shades went forth
dark under the sky. All creation wept,
wailed for the death of the King; Christ was on the cross".

The Anglo-Saxon *Dream of the Rood* is, arguably, one of the greatest religious poems in the whole of English literature. In the section which we have before us the Cross begins his story by telling of the day when he was fashioned from a tree trunk felled at the edge of a forest. In keeping with the literary style of such sagas, the Christ whom he is shaped to bear is presented in heroic terms as a great Warrior and leader of a band of followers. Half way down the text we read: 'The young hero stripped himself – that was God almighty – strong and unflinching; he stepped up on the high cross, brave in the sight of many, where he wished to redeem mankind'.

Unlike the Gospel accounts, here Christ is in complete control of his passion and death. It is he who steps up on the high cross, not the Roman soldiers who crucify him. And when, a few lines later, we read of the nails, they are described as wounding the Cross, not the Christ. It is the Cross who says: 'They drove through me with iron-coloured and sinister nails: on me the wounds are visible, the open malicious wounds'.

'Are you the King of the Jews?', asks Pilate.

All of the Passion narratives ask difficult questions of those of us who wish to call Christ our King. The soldiers dress him up in a crown and purple cloak; in questioning him, Pilate tries to discover whether Jesus accepts this royal title for himself and, when he fails to get a straight answer, taunts the Jews by describing him as their king, proclaiming his royal identity in the words of the inscription placed above the head of the helpless victim: Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.

Our passage from *The Dream of the Rood* is a good example of what can happen when we try to turn the Messiah into a monarch of our own making. In this poem, the Anglo-Saxon tradition of Warrior folk heroes turns Jesus into a King who hardly seems to suffer as his tortured body is stretched out upon the blood-stained wood of the cross. It is almost as if the Cross assumes Christ's human nature, suffering as any man would; whereas the divine Christ is anaesthetized from the pain of this tortuous execution and, even after his death, still exhibits a 'bright radiance', causing all creation to weep and wail for the death of their King.

But, lest we should become seduced by the sentimental passion of the Rood's Dream, let us not forget these words of Jesus from John's Gospel: 'My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world'.

So often, as Christians, we do see Christ's kingdom as being 'of this world' and so feel that it is up to us to win the kingdom for Christ: 'to go and make disciples of all nations' in order to establish Christ's reign on earth. But this surely misses the whole point of that wounded Cross and its warrior Victim who stand at the heart of our commemoration next week.

For the kingship of Christ does not require the loyalty of a band of warriors. The reign of Christ would not come to a sudden end if there were no one left to worship him. Thank God that unlike Pontius Pilate or earthly kings, presidents, princes and prime ministers, the Kingship of Christ is not dependent upon our

efforts, our faithfulness, our allegiance. Nor are we expected to march into battle behind his royal banner against those who do not bow down before our King.

For Jesus is, indeed, a king, born of the royal house of David. Yet, he plays his power games not to abuse or to control or for his own self-interest, but to reveal a kingdom of love, justice and mercy. As king on earth, he does not claim the royal purple which clothes the rulers of this world. For on the hill of Calvary, the scene of the greatest battle ever staged, the cross is his throne, thorns are his only crown and a bruised reed his earthly sceptre.

There, in the darkness of his passion, Christ's outstretched arms embrace the whole world and, thus, claim the whole world as his kingdom. For it is only after submitting to arrest, torture and death, that we are invited to worship the King and make disciples of all nations, revealing on earth the kingdom which his death has inaugurated: Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

There is a temptation which we so often face, just as the ninth century dreaming Rood faced, to turn Christ into a King of our world, the sort of leader that the world would prefer him to be: to take him down from the cross, to attempt to resuscitate his lifeless corpse with our cries for power, and to clothe him once again in the royal purple.

Next Friday, the unfolding drama of that most holy day will help us to resist such temptation as we are invited to pay homage to our king and venerate his cross. Such an act of devotion is so important for us who seek to take up his cross and follow him – for to kneel momentarily before the Rood's 'God of hosts, severely stretched out' is to accept *for* ourselves and to experience *within* ourselves the reign of the crucified king.

For the moment, however, let us keep silence together in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, and use the ancient words of the *Dream of the Rood* as a focus for our prayer and reflection; that we may come to know the danger as well as the salvation of kneeling at the foot of the Cross of a King.