

Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

The third Thursday of November is not as well celebrated in the United States as the fourth Thursday of November is. But in France, the third Thursday is practically a national holiday. It's Nouveau Beaujolais day. Farmers at the end of a long year of hard work in dense soil under a hot sun have begun harvesting produce. The ones who grow the beaujolais grape customarily hand over the firstfruits of their harvest to vintners at an early stage, and vintners quickly produce a wine. As you know, the best wines are known by their age, not by their youth. But people want to know how this year's harvest will taste, so they make an imperfect bottle dated for the current year and call it "new wine," or in French "nouveau beaujolais," or sometimes "beaujolais nouveau," to give it a more poetic title. It's not a serious wine. It intends to share joy, and to share it quickly. Even though it's red, people serve it chilled because it needs all the help it can get. Even so, what it lacks in quality, it compensates with joy: the satisfaction that results from long hours and demanding days of work, joy you can literally taste.

When Saint Paul concludes his First Letter to the Corinthians, he reaches into this agricultural imagery to explain nothing short of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Today's second reading starts with a blast of good news: "Christ has been raised from the dead." Then Paul defines the resurrection with a farmer's analogy: Christ is "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." To Paul, the friends who laid Jesus in the tomb planted him like a seed in the earth. There he waited together with the souls of all others who have died. But he sprung to new life first, ahead of the rest. The Father raised Christ from the dead, the firstfruits of the harvest of souls planted in the soil.

In the Old Testament the firstfruits represented not just the earliest harvest, but the best harvest. It had to be offered in sacrifice to God. In Jesus, you have the firstfruits in both senses. He is the best of the harvest that will ever come forth and therefore was sacrificed. But he is also the earliest; he foreshadows good things to come. Paul reassures the Corinthians Jesus is not the only one who will rise from the dead. Because of Adam all of us humans are mortal, but because of Christ all of us are immortal. Paul writes, "in Christ shall all be brought to life, but each in proper order: Christ the firstfruits; then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ." Many of us right now are weary of the pandemic and its restrictions, shaken by sickness and death, sad of the distance from people and events we love. How wonderful to have Paul remind us today, "Christ has been raised from the dead." And he is just the firstfruits. More of us may follow.

We hear this passage on Christ the King because Paul then says that Christ hands us, his harvest, his kingdom, to God the Father. Christ has put all enemies under his feet, and the last enemy he destroyed was death. He hands himself and all of us to the Father like a trophy. The stakes are even higher than the Super Bowl because when Christ hands his kingdom to the Father, then God will be "all in all," all things in all people.

As nouveau beaujolais celebrates the firstfruits of the grape harvest, so Christ the King celebrates the firstfruits of human harvest. This day focuses not so much on the imperfect bottle of our human life, but on the joy God offers us in the resurrection. That future is ours because we belong to Christ the King.

Sunday, November 22, 2020