

Christ the King - the Reign of God's Justice



“Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, you did it to me.”

Matthew 25, 31-46

The celebration of *Christ, the King* is a relatively recent addition to the liturgical calendar. It was introduced in the mid 1920s by Pius XI at a time when Europe was experiencing a deal of political instability. Hitler was just beginning to flex his muscles and Mussolini, arrogant and narcissistic, was trampling on anyone who dared to question his authority. Pius XI, concerned with the emerging political trends and an accompanying decline in religious faith and practice, introduced the feast in an attempt to bring Catholics to their senses and have them reflect on exactly where their allegiance lay - with political powers or with Jesus Christ?

While Matthew's parable of the last judgment, depicting Jesus on a throne separating sheep from goats might seem to be an inappropriate gospel text for the occasion, it is, in fact, saying that we demonstrate our allegiance to Jesus to the extent that we recognize him and reach out to him in the destitute, the lonely, the starving and the downtrodden.

Today's feast of *Christ, the King* also marks the conclusion of the liturgical year. For the last fifty-one Sundays we have listened to a whole range of parables and stories that have explained how Jesus became one of us and demonstrated his boundless love for each of us. We have come to appreciate the lengths to which he has gone to reach out to us and to chase us up, even at times when we have chosen to avoid him. Now on this fifty-second and last Sunday of the liturgical year, the tables are turned as we are interrogated about how we have chased after Jesus in the people whom society has alienated and even discarded. If we are disturbed by the interrogation, then we are offered the comfort of knowing that we can take stock of our performance and begin again by accepting the invitation that the first Sunday of Advent holds out to us.

In all of the Gospels, little attention is given to presenting Jesus as a king. The images of pomp and circumstance, of wealth and power and status don't sit comfortably on the Jesus we meet in the Gospels. However, in his Gospel, John gives us an insight into the kind of kingly qualities that are displayed by Jesus. In the exchange between Pilate and Jesus in the bogus trial that led to Jesus' death, Pilate asks "Then you *are* a king?" Jesus' response is very telling: "You say I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world, **to testify to the truth.**" (John 18, 37) To testify to the truth, to live with integrity is what it means to be king. This feast of Christ the King is therefore about moral witness to what is right and just and true. You and I are king when we live with moral integrity, when we stand by our commitments, no matter what the circumstances or the consequences.

In one of his books, William Bausch tells this story about Gandhi:

"One day, as Mahatma Gandhi stepped aboard a train, one of his shoes slipped off and landed on the tracks. He was unable to retrieve it, as the train had already begun to move. To the amazement - and the mockery - of his companions, Gandhi calmly took off his other shoe and threw it back along the track to land close to the first. Asked by a fellow passenger why he did so, Gandhi smiled and said: "The poor man who finds the shoe lying on the tracks will now have a pair he can use." And everyone with two shoes on his

feet knew in his heart that the shoeless Gandhi had testified to the truth. They were subject to their pride; he was king in his compassion.”

Though not a Christian, Gandhi understood and translated into action the underlying message of Jesus’ parable of the sheep and goats: that every human being is somehow animated with the life of God, created in God’s image, and, therefore, a reflection of the divine. Every human being is a manifestation of God’s life and love and, therefore, worthy to be treated with dignity and respect. We are effective as disciples of Jesus and witnesses of his gospel to the extent that we reach beyond self-interest to see in every human being the face of Jesus.