

Today we mark the feast of Christ the King. For the first time in many years we have a king in this country and images of our king were beamed across the globe during his coronation (slide Charles 3rd). The church feast of Christ the King is relatively recent – 1925- started by pope Pius 11th and intended to counter the rise of Nazism and neo paganism; might King JC be more powerful than any of the individuals promoting these isms? So, what kind of king is Jesus?

St Mary's convent in Wantage has a magnificent carved screen separating the chancel and the nave in their chapel. (slide) Crowning it is Jesus on the cross with Mary and John looking on. Underneath are the words in Latin Lord, King, Redeemer. This Jesus is not semi-naked writhing in agony, but clothed in royal robes, wearing a crown, and with his raised arms suggesting blessing rather than torture. He looks serene. At first I resented this image. It's so far from what crucifixion was like. Later I realised that it is saying something important about Jesus' death on the cross. He is Lord, because his sovereignty was won through suffering. He is king because he willingly died on the cross and by doing so, ruled over death. He is redeemer because by rising from death he opened up to us the invitation of forgiveness, a fresh start, and new life. Without suffering he could not be Lord, King and Redeemer. Those three words, Lord, King Redeemer are three ways of saying the same thing. Suffering is central to our understanding of Jesus as king. In fact, I wondered whether that huge cross might have two sides – Christ the king on one side, and the more usual suffering Christ on the other (It doesn't by the way. I did look!); they are after all two sides of the same coin.

Jesus wasn't the usual kind of king. His kingship has a hidden quality – so hidden, that it wasn't necessarily recognised during Jesus' earthly ministry. It points to what we might call an underlying principle in a world created by God – that ultimately death doesn't have the last word, and that it doesn't because of Jesus' willing suffering, and by association, because of the way in which Jesus' followers address suffering, in whatever form it comes, whether to ourselves or others.

This underlying principle is a feature of the much larger dimension in which we live which Jesus called the Kingdom of God. In this infinitely larger dimension power is exercised in a very different way, and Jesus used vivid images and stories to alert people to it. Our parable about the sheep and goats in the gospel today is one of those stories told in bold, uncompromising colours. Essentially, Jesus is challenging his hearers to consider where they are likely to encounter God. And of course, it's not in the people or places they might expect. This is a parable that was intended to prod its original hearers into a new way of seeing things. Today it's intended to prod us into awareness as we reach Advent next week and prepare to welcome God in a form we might least expect – as a baby in a manger.

So, in the parable the groups of people doing or not doing things, don't realise that they are encountering God himself in other human beings, and especially those experiencing suffering of some kind. If they had known they would have behaved differently. They were unaware. That's the whole point. Be aware, look out, your God is coming and you won't necessarily recognise him – the theme tune of Advent. Of course we would recognise him if we saw him sitting on his throne in glory, surrounded by angels, but it's too late then. The Middle Ages delighted in vivid depictions of this moment, wanting to alarm believers into good behaviour before it was too late. Here is one from the eleventh century from Conques in France (slide 1); Jesus as judge and king in glory sending some to heaven and others to hell. Note the cross above Jesus' head (slide2); kingship won through suffering.

This parable is warning us that what we do right here and now affects the extent to which we might feel at home in that larger dimension held by a God whose glory is won through suffering. We are better placed than the first hearers of the parable. We know about the crucifixion and

resurrection. We know that God comes to us in human form. More than that, we know that as we accept the invitation to share Christ's suffering and resurrection we are equipped through the Holy Spirit to do some of the things he did. Christ associated with all kinds of people, poor, rich educated, illiterate, needy, religious, outcasts..... We are invited to do the same. And we are on the receiving end of resurrection power as we do so. Our first reading from Ephesians puts it like this: 'I want you to know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead...' Christ invites us to be full of his risen life as we to face some of the wrongs and pain in our world, including our own.

So, how do we do this? Are we called to heroic deeds for Christ like some of the saints we admire? Well, we may be, though looking at famous saints like St Francis or Mother Theresa could let us off the hook. We could never be like them in following Christ, we think. We may feel that feeding the hungry, helping the homeless etc requires heroic deeds beyond our reach; that our walk with Jesus Christ requires us to produce a garden full of orchids, of exotic flowers as it were, when all God really wants of us is a decent row of carrots. The opportunity for growing these is all around us (unlike the conditions necessary for growing orchids).

The carrots Jesus is encouraging us to grow through this parable about the sheep and the goats are ways of loving our neighbour as though we are seeing God in them. Much of this is about simple human kindness rather than heroic deeds. Our Christmas edition of Newt is all about neighbours. It contains examples of kindness shown by neighbours, like the neighbour in Newtown who keeps their front garden full of colour and interest, just to give passers-by, complete strangers, pleasure. Or the one from whom you can always borrow some milk or who gives you a lift when you need to get to the hospital, or the neighbour seen meeting a child out of our school, rushing from work, really wanting to catch up on their phone, but instead giving their little one their full attention. Or the woman confined to a wheelchair who loves her neighbour the Earth so much that she makes arrangements to travel by train to Westminster to take part in prayers for COP28. Or the one praying for their global neighbours in the Middle East. These deeds may not sound heroic, but almost always they require some degree of suffering on the part of the one involved. Perhaps discomfort is a better word. And the suffering or discomfort will be hidden because it's to do with what goes on inside each of us. Kindness so often involves putting another person or thing first which means resisting a natural impulse to prioritise our own interests.

The year 5 assembly in our school this week was on the theme of buddying. This is where an older child looks out for a younger one, trying to help them. Various examples of helping were given. My favourite was helping a small member of the reception class to cross the pond in the playground. I image this was a particularly large puddle!

Pope Pius wanted to celebrate Christ as king, I imagine, to present him as someone more powerful than the despotic rulers of his day. I'm not sure if he was presenting Christ's power in the same way as I have tried to do this morning. The Christian path may be more about undermining evil than zapping it, or about such an accumulation of goodness that evil is smothered. We used to hear the phrase about our public services 'Death by a thousand cuts'. I want to suggest that for a church 'life abundant by a thousand acts of kindness' may be a powerful antidote to the many wrongs in our world.

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