

Homily: Solemnity of Christ the King 2020

A few months ago I came across a story about a woman who had a revelation from Jesus. He said to her, "I will come and visit you at home tomorrow." Understandably excited, and wanting to make Him as welcome as possible, she busily set about cleaning and tidying the house, and preparing various types of food and drink, so that He would receive the very best hospitality. Early in the morning, the doorbell rang, and she excitedly went to the door, ready to welcome the Lord in. Her face fell – it was only her neighbour, wondering if she could come round and help with some work in her house. "Of course, I'd help if I could," she answered, "but I'm expecting a very important visitor." So she continued to wait. Around lunchtime, there was a knock on the door. "He's come for lunch," she thought; but again, she was disappointed. At the door was a friend of hers, asking if she could come in for a chat. "I'm sorry," she answered, "it's really not possible just now. I'm expecting a very important visitor. Another time, perhaps?" The hours rolled on, and the bell rang again. To her dismay, it was an ex-prisoner at the door, on a rehabilitation programme, asking if she wanted to buy any of his goods. "I can't do this now," she responded. "I'm expecting someone." As the evening fell, she grew tired, and before she went to bed, she turned to the Lord in prayer. "Where were You, Lord?" she asked; "I waited all day for You." "I called three times," the Lord answered, "and each time, you were too busy for me."

In a way, that story sums up something of the teaching of this great scene in St Matthew's Gospel. Jesus teaches us to see Him in the least of our brothers and sisters, and to love them out of love for Him. As Christians, we have an additional motive for showing love, to friends, neighbours and indeed to strangers too, because we can see Jesus in each person we meet. Every one of us was created in the image of God, and we are invited to continue to recognise the image of Jesus, the face of Jesus in all those who are in need. If we do this, we show our love for our neighbour and our love for the Lord Himself in each act of kindness we perform.

Yet today's Gospel is not just about how we are to act towards our brothers and sisters; it also teaches us about Jesus. Hearing it today, on the feast of Christ the King, we are invited to ask: what sort of king is He? What does His kingdom look like? When Jesus tells us: "Whatever you did for the least of my brothers or sisters, you did for me", He shows us that He is not a king who is aloof and distant. He is a king who is close to, even within, each person, especially those who are most in need. "I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me; in prison and you came to see me." This teaches us about the Kingdom. Jesus' whole public life: His teaching, His miracles, His death and resurrection, reveal to us the Kingdom of God. And as He taught us, Jesus shared these very experiences: when He fasted in the desert for 40 days, He was hungry and thirsty; at the well, He asked the woman for something to drink; again, on the cross, He said, "I thirst". At times He was a stranger – an exile in Egypt, a visitor to Samaritan towns. On the cross He was stripped naked, humiliated for all to see; before that He was in prison, held under guard by the Temple police, Herod and the Romans. He has experienced human suffering, and now He identifies Himself with all who suffer today. This is the kind of King He is.

“He came from His blest throne, salvation to bestow”, so the hymn says. He descended from His royal throne in heaven to come and share our life and our sufferings on earth. And He did this so that we might be raised up from our sufferings to share His kingship in heaven. “Come, you whom my Father has blessed,” He tells the virtuous, “Inherit the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world.” Inherit the kingdom – in other words, you too shall reign. The King has come to earth, made Himself lowly, so that we may one day all reign with Him. And so the Kingdom of God reveals itself not as a kingdom in which the lowly are kept low; instead, they are raised up – we are raised up – to share in the glory of our King. And He reveals Himself as a King who is not self-serving, but generous, gracious, close to His people, desiring to share the riches of the Kingdom with us all.

Today’s Gospel speaks very clearly to us of what we sometimes call the ‘four last things’: death, judgement, heaven and hell. We know that one day we will leave this earth; the Lord teaches us today that He will be our judge – we will account for our lives before Him. Our prayer and our hope, of course, is that He will welcome us into His Kingdom. Today He spells out for us how we will be judged: by the amount of love – genuine, self-giving love – that we show to others. Wherever we are lacking in love, let’s entrust ourselves to His mercy and ask for the grace we need to love ever more deeply. Let’s try to see His face in the faces of those in need, and so not miss our opportunities to show Him love.

At this, the last Sunday Mass of the Church’s year, we’re remembering in prayer especially those who have died in the last twelve months. We trust in the promise made in today’s second reading: that when Christ’s kingdom comes in its fulness, the last of His enemies to be destroyed will be death. We put our faith in God’s goodness, remembering the many acts of love our beloved relatives, friends and fellow parishioners have performed here on earth. We know that their goodness will not go unrewarded. With this confidence, and with absolute trust in the mercy of Jesus, we commend them to Him, praying that they too may hear these words spoken by the King: “Come, you whom my Father has blessed; inherit the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world.” The virtuous, Jesus tells us today, will go away to eternal life. May it be so for all we love. May they rest in peace. Amen.

Fr Andrew

