

Christ the King Reflection 22/11/20 St Stephen's UCA

Today, we will have to imagine the familiar stained glass window in our sanctuary of Christ the King, enthroned, holding the orb of kingship in his left hand while his right hand is raised in teaching mode. Incorporated in the window is the story of his life and death. Jesus is not like any other earthly king or powerful leader. He is the servant King, coming to us as a baby, born in a stable to humble people living under occupation. There was no wealth no palace, no status, no army, no power play, or domination, over others, then, or at any time in his life.

The Israelites in the Old Testament wanted a king to rule them, although they were warned by the prophet Samuel that the king would make them servants and slaves, take their crops, draft them into the army, take their daughters, control their lives. All of that, yet they chose to have a king, and to live with the consequences. The history of Kings and Queens in the Common Era follows the same pattern of dominance, and there has been a great struggle to establish the rights of the people and institutions of government that can control monarchies and dictators.

Why do we keep Christ the King Sunday in the modern world!
In one sentence. He turns our notion of kingship upside down!

We still understand the concept of 'King' or autocratic ruler, and are amazed and encouraged by the strong contrast with Christ, the King of love who gave his life for us, and invites us, but does not coerce us, to follow him.

The liturgy and doctrines of the Church teach that Christ the King will come again to 'judge the quick and the dead.' There will be accountability for our actions sometime and that's scary.

Also the apocalyptic imagery of revelation, of signs, disasters and the stark conflict between good and evil are alarming. However, these things have been happening in the world for centuries without Christ's return. Apocalyptic writing does not impact much on modern people. When it was written it was intended to encourage those enduring persecution and trouble. There was hope that eventually the wicked will be condemned and the righteous vindicated when Christ, the king, returns.

The early church expected Jesus to return at any time, and soon. Hence the emphasis on being prepared and innovative, as in the story of the Bridesmaids and the Talents in Mathew's gospel ch 25. Today's story of the Great Judgment (Matt 25.31-46) completes the chapter. It's a challenge for us because in the 21st century we are still waiting for Christ to return and have put this teaching on the back burner.

In 'Lifting the Burden', Brendan Byrne's thoughtful commentary on Matthew's Gospel, suggests another way of understanding Jesus' discourse in Matthew 24-25. It is like a 'farewell testament' given by a significant teacher before his death to maintain hope among his disciples in the present and for the future. So some revelatory language and story may be expected.

We now come to the story of the Judgment of the Nations and there is much to be gained from this carefully balanced and surprising story. The Judge, the Son of Man, (note this name as his identification with humanity), like a shepherd, separates the nations into the sheep and the goats. The sheep, the blessed ones, are put on his right, and the goats, (the accursed) are put on his left. This judgment seems to be done fairly quickly, before the reasons for it are given. In truth, members of the human race have already carried out their actions.

In a dramatic and surprising way, the Son of Man identifies himself as the one in need whom the nations have encountered. The blessed ones unawares, have ministered to him; the others also unaware, did not. His hunger and thirst were satisfied: he was made welcome, clothed, made well and visited in prison. Two points can be made here.

First, the criteria for judgment. It's not about major criminal acts, but about doing or not doing basic acts of mercy or compassion that make for health and wholeness. The list is repeated four times over –feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, hospitality to the homeless, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting the imprisoned.

We are familiar with this criteria, as are many who are not followers of Christ but practice mercy. They too, are the blessed.

Second, the identification of the King, the Son of Man with the needy. In his ministry among people, Jesus met their need for health, healing, welcome, acceptance, repentance and forgiveness. As followers of Jesus, we are to have that same compassion for others, no matter what race, gender, class, creed or circumstance. And we are to act. This may involve – generosity in giving of resources, our time, our energy; becoming involved in organisations and being political. In a world of endless need, we have to choose what we can manage. The principle of compassion is clear, but carrying it out is complex. But in the end it is what counts. Justin Byrne wisely comments.

“In loving and serving one's neighbour in the way described here, one is actually loving and serving Christ, and in loving and serving Christ, one is loving and serving 'God with us.' We can now move into Advent in hope, peace, love and joy.