

Christ the King: The least

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world... And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Uncomfortable reading. The losers didn't even know they were losing.

I wonder how you hear these verses? I wonder where in the image you find yourself? One of the blessed being invited with smile and joy and relief into the Kingdom? That's my hope. I don't dare to visualise my expulsion to eternal punishment. I'm not sure I can.

We're thinking today of Christ the King. Not the sort of king anyone was expecting. Not the sort of kingdom people were expecting either. Jesus who began life when the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary. Who was born in a stable. Who, following a life of radical preaching and healing and delivering, was crucified for the threat he was to the established order. He rose again the Saviour and Judge of all. Through all of his earthly life he was a king. He left the throne of heaven to take the role of a servant, but he was still king.

This is crucial, the king of heaven, God the Son, comes in the form of a servant, divests himself of pomp and protection, comes to serve. He served by making the love of God known to all who would listen in his words and in his actions. He spent time with the 'least' in the social order of the time even more than he spent time with those who thought themselves OK.

In all the divisions of our worlds, Christ the servant king constantly calls us to love everyone, to judge no one. Prisoners have done something wrong, right! They're in prison for a

reason. That's justice. Why would we bother visiting? We pay taxes for the justice system, don't we?

What does Jesus mean when he says, “I was hungry and you gave me food... I was in prison and you visited me.”

Our servant King sees our motive and intention. He knows what is in our heart. Is it the desire to give in such a way that dignity is preserved? Is it a desire to give to appease our conscience? You saw Me and you gave in a way that honoured Me in my children. //

The woman handed me three packets of food: “Here, these are for the foodbank. They were there for me these last months and I want to give something back.” I was shocked. I knew that this woman's personal circumstances were an emotional hell. I didn't know that she was going through an economic hell too. I didn't know that she was unable, for some months, to put food on the table for her children.

Conflicting feelings coursed through me: how could I not have known? If I had known, what would I have done? How does one support and help while preserving dignity?

It is so easy to give money, to donate food. We never have to look at the recipient of our charity in the eyes.

‘I was hungry, you saw, you knew, you acted.

I was thirsty, you were there, you gave water.

You didn't keep your mouth closed when I was bullied for being different. You stood up for me. Befriended me.

You were close enough to see my despair, my rock bottom, my nakedness, and your compassion clothed me.

When I was sick, closed in, at my lowest, you came, you dressed my wounds, held a cup to my dry lips, waited while I slowly ate a few morsels.

You loved me.’

Dear friends, every human being is made in the image of God. Christ the King of the universe looked at every one, petitioner or persecutor, and knew his own hand at work in their creation. He loved them because they were ‘fearfully and wonderfully made’.

Every day we will have opportunity to be Christ’s hands and feet and voice to His little ones. Every day we will have the chance to be good news, to bring hope where there is despair. Each and every day, Christ the servant King is bringing salvation to the world; He brings it through you and through me.

Do we have eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to love?

Will we judge those in need as feckless, spongers, tricksters?
Will we always be protective of what we have?

In a world turned upside down in ways we never imagined, we are perhaps now the ones who feel in prison with no one to visit. Some of us may be hungry and thirsty and sick. It may be I who is the stranger here with no networks of support. How do we support one another in need in such a way that you or I feel valued, worthy, also with something to offer?

I remember visiting some poor villages in South Africa during a period of drought. All some families had was dry maize boiled up, not very palatable. Yet, in the homes we visited, we were without fail offered a bowl of food. We were not that hungry but we were fed.

Times will become much harder through 2021. Many of us will need to tighten our belts; to budget more carefully; to forgo certain luxuries. We may need to downsize quite radically. Sell our car and rely on public transport. Will we, like those African villagers, still be generous with what we have? Will we, as they do, recognise the dignity of every person who crosses their path, a dignity worthy of the effort of hospitality and care?

I wonder whether I will manage to continue to be God’s ambassador of love and dignity when I am threatened? I wonder how I will receive the charity of others when I am in need?

Maybe the uncomfortable image of this Gospel reading today, of separation to eternal life and to eternal punishment acts as a goad, a sobering picture which stops us and makes us think of our allegiances, our racisms, our excluding and ‘othering’ of people.

This reading calls us to make our first, our primary allegiance to Christ the servant King. To pattern our lives on Him. When we find ourselves judging others, excluding others, may we be swiftly reminded of this troubling picture of the blessed and punished in the courtroom of heaven of our Gospel today. May our focus may be lifted to the King in the picture. It’s no use looking at the multitude and wondering when we ever did or didn’t feed the hungry, slake the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner?

We lift our eyes to the crucified and risen King who alone can forgive our blindness, our judging, our partiality, our self-protection. We worship Him, Christ the Servant King, and we live in our worlds as the forgiven, welcomed, loved, hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, imprisoned people who know profoundly that their service of all others is the worship and service of the Christ their Servant King.