

## Thirty Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time : Christ the King

Today is the last Sunday in the Church's liturgical year, and the readings fix our attention on Jesus as lord and king of the whole of the created universe.

The ancient Eastern myths portray God as a warrior king conquering the powers of chaos, imagined as disordered and tumultuous waters, swirling and clashing - the salt water of the Ocean hurling itself against the fresh water bursting forth from the Abyss. The responsorial psalm of today's Mass borrows this imagery, speaking of the roaring of the waters, but insists that there is a power even greater than theirs and it is the power of God who dominates the forces of chaos, holds them in check and brings order out of chaos. It is a hymn of praise of the Lord who has donned the armour of battle, and, in splendid majesty, is conquering the forces of evil, establishing his will on the earth, and reigning as King, supreme over all.

It is so easy for us to fix our eyes on the evil that we see around us, and on the jarring cacophony of the strident and ugly forces that disturb our planet and disrupt our peace. We cannot escape from this noisy world, and our hearts and minds cannot pretend to be untouched by the ugliness that afflicts and oppresses us. We are invited today to look beyond evil of all kinds to contemplate the one who is beautiful and true and all-powerful, and who reigns over all.

However, it is most important that we look for him in the right place, and the reading from the Apocalypse invites us to look upon the one whose heart we have pierced. Likewise the gospel presents our king as the one standing bound before Pilate, about to be scourged, crowned with thorns and crucified. This is he who is king and lord of history. As Christians, if we want to look upon the one who is lord of all creation, we are to look at Jesus hanging on the cross. This is the Son of Man of whom the prophecy of Daniel speaks. He who reigns forever gloriously is the one who identifies with the poor and oppressed and marginalised of our world against the powers of evil that oppress us. What does this tell us about our ideas of power, leadership and authority?

When we think of leadership, we are inclined to think first of those who are in charge - who have power to make decisions and to enforce them. In the Church, for example, we tend to think of the leaders as the Pope and the Bishops. Organisational leadership is, of course, very important. We are right to acknowledge the power and authority that goes with such positions, and we are right to try to ensure that those exercising such power are gifted to do it well. We are also right to be concerned when certain classes of people are excluded from such positions for reasons that are to do with custom rather than with the living of the gospel.

Theology, liturgy and the community life of the Church are about reflecting on the wonderful mystery of religious experience. We continue to try to make sense of the communion with God which we receive as God's gift. This must be done from within a culture and must be expressed in the language that makes sense to people while keeping the mystery intact. When cultures were more static, theology did not suffer so much from being repeated without rethinking. This is not the case today. Granted the dramatic changes through which we have gone in the last hundred years, many question the wisdom of limiting organisational leadership in the church to men. It seems clear to many that it would be a better witness to our faith if it included women. Many question the wisdom of limiting organizational leadership to celibates and argue that it would be a better witness to our faith, and provide better governance, if it included the

experience of the married.

These are important issues if the Church is going to speak to today's world about institutional leadership that is inspired by the gospel.

However, today's readings warn us against putting organizational leadership at the centre of our concern. This is because the leadership portrayed by the crucified Jesus is of a different kind. We are taught to look at Jesus on the cross. It is he who is lord and king. Those who exercised the kind of organisational leadership of which we have been speaking were people like the high priest, Pilate and Herod. They were bad leaders as is made obvious by their criminally unjust crucifying of Jesus. What they did was terrible, and we are right to name it for what it was, and to try to ensure that people in such positions do not abuse their power.

However a much more important lesson is to be learned. The real leadership which we see when we look at the crucifixion is not organisational decision-making leadership. We do not look to the high priest, or to Pilate or Herod to see the real authority and power that stands out on the hill of Calvary. The most important area for leadership lies in the area of love. Christ the king shows us that ultimate power is the power of love. Ultimate authority is the authority that is exercised in loving. Ultimate leadership is leadership in love. Our lord and king is a victim of the unjust exercise of organisational leadership. But no one could stop him loving, and his self-giving love shines out in splendour from the cross. The love that flows from his pierced and broken heart continues to reveal the power of God and to overcome the evil that comes from the abuse of power.

Today's feast exhorts us not to lose our perspective. There are defects in the exercise of leadership in every community including, of course, the Catholic Church. We are sinful human beings who, even with the best of goodwill, are blinded by prejudices and locked into ways of thinking and behaving that are not as open to the Spirit as we could be. Change takes time and a lot of courage. But we will bring about good change only in proportion to our love, for love is what God is, and love is what we see in the lord and king of history, reigning from the cross.

This is an uncomfortable and unpopular view, but it is our faith. We might want a God who controls the world and who exercises his despotic control by wiping out sinners and setting everything right. But we do not have such a God. We have a God who respects our freedom, and so a God who suffers the evil that we perpetrate, even to sharing the oppression on a cross. The God revealed by Jesus is not powerless before the tumult of chaos, but the power he brings to bear is the power of love, not the power we associate with organisational leadership that can over-ride others and get its own way.

God loves us and respects us and attracts us to good, and he does so in a way that will never ever be conquered by evil. God is all-powerful – yes! – all-powerful LOVE. Love continues to outwit hate in our world. Love continues to suffer through to the truth. Love continues to create life and to forgive and to nurture. Love may not hit the headlines. If it is not newsworthy, that is because it is not news - it is so ordinary and normal and all-pervasive that we are not surprised by it as we are by the news of evil. This is good, surely, so long as we do not focus so intently on the headlines that we forget to look at our lives and the lives of those around us. What a tragedy it would have been if Mary and the Beloved disciple had spent their time complaining

about the high priest rather than looking upon Jesus and listening to the words of love which he spoke.

The feast of Christ the King has implications for every aspect of our church life. Its main message, however, is of the power of love in any and every circumstance of life. As we struggle for truth and for justice, let us learn from him to use only the weapons of love, for it is with love that God conquered chaos, and it is with love that Jesus continues to conquer the human heart. 'Take courage', he said, 'I have overcome the world'(John 16:33).