

34th Sunday of the Year, Year C

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.

If we look back over the great Empires of history, we remember successful military campaigns, and we think of nations that wielded power over subject peoples. Today, for the most part, we have relegated kings to the history books, and we think in terms of elected presidents, but the reality of military and economic domination is still much the same. Such is the unscrupulous exercise of economic power wielded by any number of multinational companies today, that many governments are powerless to protect their people against the injustices that are suffered at their hands.

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. Today, however, we are invited to look beyond evil of all kinds to contemplate the one who is beautiful and true and all-powerful and who reigns over all. We are invited to see Jesus as the one who reigns over the whole of the universe.

Our faith is that this will be manifestly so on the other side of death when human goodness will be vindicated by God, and evil purged. This is the meaning of our doctrines of heaven and hell. But our faith stirs us to recall that the kingdom of God - the kingdom of love and justice and peace - is already at work in our world, like leaven working its way through the dough. This is the kingdom which Jesus not only preached but brought about in the lives of those who followed him. Did he not say: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'(Matthew 5:3) and also 'Blessed are those who suffer in the cause of right, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'(5:10)?

God is love, and wherever love is working to heal and forgive and encourage and build peace, there we find the reign of God. The love-power of the risen Jesus is working wonders in every part of our world all the time. Today we celebrate that fact and praise God for the wonder of his love.

The Gospel sets the scene perfectly. Jesus is dying on the cross. From one point of view we would hardly see him as a powerful figure. He is a victim of injustice, and has no protection against the abuse hurled at him by the religious leaders, the soldiers and even of the criminal dying beside him. Yet the most powerful figure in the crucifixion scene is not Pilate, or the high priest or the soldier in charge of those carrying out the crucifixion. The most powerful figure is Jesus, and one of the criminals sees this clearly and asks to be with Jesus when he enters his kingdom. Our hearts cannot fail to be moved when the crucified Jesus, unable to reach out to the man dying beside him, turns to him and says with love: 'Today you will be with me in paradise'.

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. Today's Gospel reminds us that the only real power in our world is the power of love. It is Jesus who is the free man. It is Jesus who is the king of God's kingdom of love.

Organisational leadership and decision making in the community are important issues. We must do all we can to ensure that those who are discerned to have the grace-gifts necessary are appointed to such positions. But while we struggle to achieve justice, let us not lose our perspective. The most important area for leadership lies in the area of love. 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.

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.

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 (thank 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 the good thief had been so obsessed with the abuse of the system responsible for putting him on the cross that he had failed to look 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 lives. 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).