

CHRIST THE KING – 2020

Readings: Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17; 1 Cor 15:20, 26-28; Matt 25:31-46

Among AA Milne's poems, "When we were young," Christopher Robin muses about being a king, "I often wish I were a king, and then I could do anything." This is the fairy tale fantasy about kingship but Jesus talked about kingly leadership as one of service, and in today's readings, service is seen as being a good shepherd.

Ezekiel delivers a message of hope to God's exiled people in Babylon. He tells them that their leaders had failed them, so God himself would be their shepherd. He would gather them and restore them to glory. He would bring them new life and judge them according to their actions.

The gospel reading gives us an image of Jesus at the Last Judgment dividing those standing before him. This imagery must be read very carefully if we are not to misunderstand it. The ones being divided are the nations of the world. Jesus, the Son of Man can tell the true nature of those gathered before the throne as easily as a shepherd can tell a sheep from a goat. So who are all the nations? In Matthew's gospel this phrase is used to describe those nations that Jesus' disciples are told to evangelise, namely all the world's nations. Who are the 'least of these my brethren?' Jesus' brethren are his disciples and the 'little ones' are those who believe in him. The disciples are not being judged with the nations because they are standing around Jesus' throne, and he refers to them as part of the judgement.

The Last Judgement is not a judgement about gaining salvation through good works like caring for the needy. The nations are judged by the way they have treated the disciples who came to proclaim the gospel of Jesus' resurrection. Kindness shown towards the Church is a sign of the acceptance of the disciples and of Jesus himself. Persecution and hostility to the Church is a sign of the rejection of Jesus and his disciples. In the imagery in this reading, four points are worth noting:-

1. The world meets Christ through his disciples, mainly the lay disciples.
2. Both lay and clerical disciples are Christ's representatives in the world.
3. The strength of solidarity between Christ, who is God with us, and his disciples will be fully revealed to everyone when Jesus returns at the end of all things.
4. The humble status of Christ's disciples as the hungry, thirsty, lame, or in the words of St Paul, the dishonoured and dregs of society, will be reversed at the Last Judgement (1Cor 4:9-13).

The message of the imagery Matthew's uses is similar to that in the Book of Daniel and Revelation. It is a message of consolation to those disciples suffering the desolation of the rejected Christ in a hostile

world. In heaven, those who have persevered will suffer no more but rather share in the triumphant kingly glory of Jesus, the paschal lamb who was slain for the salvation of the world. As St Paul tells the Corinthians, the logical conclusion to Christ's resurrection is the eventual resurrection of Christ's faithful disciples. Today's gospel image is often read as emphasising the Church's obligation to care for the marginalised. We are obliged to do so but this is not the issue here. Interpreting this image in this way is seeing it as the 'haves' being generous to the 'have nots.' The Church is not being judged, the secular world is! St Matthew records this image from the perspective of the disciples in the Church that is oppressed and persecuted because of their commitment to Christ. Matthew is telling us to be of good courage and to hold fast to the one who is the Way, the Truth and the Life and at the end we will discover whether we join the sheep or the goats!

Msgr Harry Entwistle

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