

Christ's Distressing Disguise

So we come to the end of the Christian year with 'Christ the King' Sunday. This is an occasion that was established relatively recently, in 1925, by Pope Pius XI, who did so because he was alarmed at the state of the world as he looked around him. He saw the rise of secularism, the decline of Christian belief and the erosion of the church's role and authority, and he saw the rise of nationalism and dictators and so he wanted a special day to proclaim Jesus as Lord and King. And with that context perhaps we can appreciate the importance of Christ the King Sunday in today's world, and it is fitting that we celebrate it at the climax of the Christian year during which our weekly readings have taken us through the great acts of God in creation and redemption, and we anticipate next Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, when we begin telling the story all over again. On this Sunday, however, we are drawn to this regal, majestic image of Jesus. This Christ whose presence has been woven into all our readings and our worship over the past year is disclosed to be the King, and as the King he is the judge of all the earth, his throne a judgement throne.

But note that he is no ordinary king. He is not cast in the image of earthly kings and sovereigns. He is the shepherd king. Centuries before the prophet Ezekiel had castigated Israel's kings who had been corrupted by power. While earthly kings so often oppress and despoil their subjects, Ezekiel had spoken of this king who would come to put things right. He would shepherd the victims, gathering the scattered and feeding the hungry and giving rest to the weary and bringing them home. And now in our reading from Matthew we find something quite astonishing. We find that this King has come, this King with his passion for the lost and the poor, and he is not only to be found seated upon his judgement throne. That's where you would expect to find a king – on a great, ornate throne. But the astonishing this is that this shepherd king is to be found somewhere else as well. This shepherd king so identifies with the poor and their cause that he becomes one with them, being found in them. He not only cares for the poor and the lost but he does so such that his identity merges with theirs, as it soon will completely when he dies outcast and forsaken on the

cross. And so we get these extraordinary words, ‘anything you did for one of my brothers here, anything you did for the hungry and the naked and the sick and the imprisoned, anything that you did for one of the least of these, you did for me.’ And we have what Mother Teresa of Calcutta called Christ in ‘his distressing disguise’, masked in the faces of the poor. This is the Christ who lays aside his royal robe and dons the rags of the poor and the wretched and who goes unrecognised as a result. And the world is summoned to meet Christ there. And there have been many Christians, like Mother Teresa, who have been inspired by this passage to seek out Christ in this distressing disguise wherever he may be found. A couple of weeks ago I spoke about trysting places – meeting places where we encounter Christ, making a rendezvous with him. While we wait for Jesus and experience the perplexing reality of his absence there are these appointed places where he comes to meet us. And the poor and the destitute are one such trysting place. There we make an appointment with Christ, and let me tell you one reason why I find that striking and profoundly important.

Think of it this way. I wonder what you would say if I were to ask you where you sense God, where you become aware of God, where you intuit God’s presence. I suspect that many of you would speak of experiences of beauty. You might think of a sun going down over a landscape at the end of a glorious Sumer’s day, or a sunrise on a chill, frosty winter morning, or you might speak of a great piece of music which stirs your spirit and elevates your soul, or a great painting that casts its spell upon you. And there you sense God. There is what we might call an aesthetic sense of the presence of God, one that is associated with beauty. But this passage tells us something quite disturbing. A God that is only found in such places becomes an idol because here God in Christ is to be found somewhere very different, in the poor and the distressed and the wretched of the earth – in other words in ugliness. And that may offend our sensibilities. This week the Kloof, the homeless shelter where a team from our church cooks each month, had an open evening and I went along and got talking to a young volunteer who helps out there. And he was telling me what they do there and one thing they do is give people who need it a pedicure. They treat people’s feet. And this volunteer told me of two occasions when he had to run out of the room so appalling was the stench. There is ugliness for you – and there is Christ: ‘in as much as you tended the feet, the weary, worn and stinking feet of one of these, the least, you did it unto me’.

One of my heroes of the faith is a woman called Dorothy Day who founded the Catholic Workers Movement in America and who worked among the homeless and the destitute in New York last century. I want to quote from something she wrote entitled 'Little by Little' and I'll return to that title and its significance later. Day begins by speaking of St Francis of Assisi and his famous encounter with a leper. Francis was riding home from war one day when he came upon a leper who stood in his path. His immediate reaction was one of utter revulsion. But something prompted him to dismount and to wrap his cloak around the man. Then, moved by some divine impulse, he kissed him. His disgust turned to compassion and that was a turning point, a conversion moment for Francis. And Dorothy Day goes on to tell of two occasions when she 'kissed lepers'. Once was when she had to refuse a bed to a drunken prostitute with a huge, toothless, rouged mouth. Day had been told that if you have to refuse someone you should at least do it so that the person goes away happier. So she writes, 'I had to deny her a bed but when that woman asked me to kiss her, I did, and it was a loathsome thing, the way she did it. It was scarcely a mark of normal human affection.' On another occasion she encountered a woman with cancer of the face who she gave money to, and the woman tried to kiss her hand in gratitude. She writes, 'the only thing I could do was kiss her dirty old face with the gaping hole in it where an eye and a nose had been.' And then she adds, 'It sounds like a heroic deed but it was not. One gets used to ugliness so quickly.'

Let me push this a little further. You see, what is so important about situations like these do, these situations of ugliness and distress, is that they have the capacity to evoke in us a crucial quality, and that is compassion. And compassion is vital to the Christian life, as it was to Jesus. Earlier on in Matthew, in chapter 9, we read of Christ going through the towns teaching and proclaiming the good news and we read that 'the sight of the crowds moved him to compassion: they were like sheep without a shepherd, harassed and helpless'. Here is the shepherd king stirred to compassion and we hear there echoes of our Ezekiel passage, with its depiction of the people as lost sheep who are scattered and leaderless.

There is a popular theologian called Marcus Borg who has a fascinating thesis. He maintains that in Jesus' day there were what he calls two kinds of politics operating. One the one hand there was 'the politics of holiness' which was what identified the Pharisees in particular. For them holiness was the

dominant characteristic of God. God was supremely holy and God's holiness was to be observed in society. But the thing about holiness is that it sets people apart – it means 'set apart' - and it is exclusive and it renders the sinner an outcast. But Borg argues that Jesus exercised a 'politics of compassion' as for him it was not holiness but compassion that was the dominant feature of God. And compassion is an inclusive quality. It embraces the unclean that holiness is revolted by and excludes. And that is why Jesus identified with the sinners who the Pharisees spurned, and why he caused offence by reaching out to them and eating with them because he wanted to reveal a different God, a compassionate God. And beautiful sunsets and landscapes and great symphonies may stir and inspire us but they do not have the capacity to arouse compassion in the way that a living, suffering human being does. And nor do they test and stretch our compassion as ugliness does. Sunsets and symphonies soothe our souls and sedate us. But they do not try our compassion and challenge it the way that Francis was challenged by the leper. And indeed the beautiful does not provoke in us anger and outrage at the things that render people naked, and homeless, and destitute and frequenters of prison. And if we are to become like our compassionate Lord, if that quality is to be found in us so that it may season an often ruthless and compassionless world, then we need to meet Jesus where he says here that he is to be found.

So where are we to begin? Well, this is where this Matthew passage gives us hope and encouragement. I am always struck by the way Jesus says, 'anything you did for one of my brothers here, however insignificant, you did for me'. Anything you did for one – just one – and however insignificant. You see, Jesus does not call us to save the world – that's his job. He does not ask us to be walking Statues of Liberty – 'bring me your tired, you poor, your huddled masses... etc.' He says in effect, find one. However insignificant. That makes it accessible, do-able. That's the importance of Day's title, 'Little by Little'. She writes, 'Sometimes it takes but one step. We would like to think so. And yet the older I get the more I see that life is made up of many steps, and they are very small affairs, not giant strides.'

So compassion is formed in us. One small step at a time, little by little, little acts of compassion that test and stretch us. But of course when Jesus is involved a little goes a very long way. And he is involved, for he tells us that 'just as you did it to one of the least of these... you did it to me.' Amen.

Almighty and holy God, Ancient of Days,
Alpha and omega, beginning and end,
God of time and God of eternity
who was and is and is to come,
we praise and bless you sovereign God,
Maker of all;
and we praise and bless the Holy Spirit who fills our hearts
and prompts our worship;
and we praise and bless Jesus Christ,

the Shepherd King, ruler and judge of all.
We praise you on this day for all your great acts
in creation and in salvation,
for your making of all things
and the hope of your coming to make all things new.
And God you come to us now in Jesus Christ,
And you come in the poor and the outcast and the destitute.
Forgive us, we pray, for when we have passed you by.
Forgive us we pray, when we have ignored you
And hardened our hearts to the needy.

Jesus Christ, Son of God...

O God, in Jesus Christ you have loved us
and freed us by his blood
and called us to be a people of worship and praise.
Grant us grace to live out that calling,
For we pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord,
in whose words we pray together, saying...

Your kingdom come, O Lord...

Lord Jesus Christ, Shepherd King,
enthroned over all and with authority over all,
come we pray and tend your scattered flock.

We pray today for those in whom you are found,
recalling the human places where we meet you...

we pray for the hungry and the destitute,
and for a fairer sharing of the earth's gifts and resources.
O God may we not just feed the hungry and the starving
but rather may we enable a world where they may be empowered to
feed themselves –
indeed a world where there are no more hungry
and thirsty and naked...

and we pray for the stranger,
for the refugee and the migrant in our midst,
that they may know compassion and be treated with dignity
and that they may find a place they can call home.

Your kingdom come, O Lord...

We pray for the sick,
and we think today of this terrible scourge of ebola
that has killed so many in Guinea and Liberia and
Sierra Leone and other parts of Africa.
We pray for those who nurse the victims of ebola
and we pray that you would hasten the day when such diseases will be
easily treatable.

We pray for prisoners who are jailed for their wrongdoing,
and we pray that our prisons may be humane
and places not merely of punishment but of rehabilitation
and redemption.

And we pray too for prisoners of conscience and those
imprisoned for their faith that you will sustain and
strengthen them and bring their release...

O God, you have come to us in Jesus Christ,
and now he comes to us in the poor and the destitute.
Help us to reach out to him in them
and so may we find ourselves blessed even as we bless others.

Your kingdom come, O Lord...

