

Christ the King (A)
(Ezekiel 34:11-12.15-17 / Matthew 25:31-46)
26.11.2017

Servant King

The image of king applied to Jesus has always been in need of purification and evangelisation. Pontius Pilate's question to Jesus: "So you are a king?" (Jn 18:37) is a perpetual reminder of our difficulty to grasp the full meaning of what it means for Jesus to be a king.

The problem is that we are tempted to think that if Christ is a king, then the Church has to be structured and organised like a monarchy. Recently I heard a young American bishop, just transferred from one episcopal see to another, delivering his first speech in his new cathedral. He began by speaking about himself, the bishop, then he addressed the priests of his new diocese, then the religious and then the laity.

I do not think – I hope – that he did not mean to come across this way, but, listening to him, it seemed as if the Church was like a pyramid, a perfect stratified and organised society.

In a monarchy, the higher we are on the pyramid, the closer we are to the monarch. The problem is that, in the Church, we do not ascend by birth, merits, ambition, money, relationships or by the whim of the monarch but by love. Love is the wings that help us to fly to God. In a more modern language, we could say that love is the lift which leads us to the top. Are closer to Christ the King, not those who have been ordained priest, not those who have power and authority, not those who have studied theology or sing in Latin, but those who love.

There is no doubt that there are different ministries and various levels of responsibility in the Church, yet our Gospel reading today reminds us forcibly that ministries and responsibilities in the Church are for the service of all. There is nothing in the Church which is not about service, loving service of Christ in one another.

Christ the King challenges the meaning of kingship at a deep level: by being a servant, not only in word but also in deed. Christ is not dressed in fine linen clothes, seated on a high throne, far removed from us. He is not crowned with a golden and heavily jewelled crown. All these images distort the reality and do not help us to relate to Christ in a good way. Christ is in our midst, he has "the smell of the sheep" (Pope Francis, 2013), he walks at our pace and on our roads, he knows our pain because he carries our suffering, he feels what we feel. He is a humble king who serves us in truth by giving his life for each one of us totally and unconditionally.

This is the king we worship and honour today.

Here allow me to quote once again a line that, I already quoted in the past from this pulpit. It sums up in a very powerful way the meaning of this feast, it is from the Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel: "The greatest sin of man is to forget that he is a prince" (*God in Search...* p. 417).

Maybe the problem is not so much that we have forgotten that we are members of the royal family, we all know deep within us that we are made for more than we are, but the problem is that we want to obtain our end on our own terms: by elbowing others out of the

way and trampling over them, by buying or winning our royal status with our personal achievements, we do not want to owe our honour to anybody but ourselves.

However our ways are not God's ways. If we want to claim in truth our royal dignity as sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters of Christ the King, we must live as Christ showed us: by selflessly serving others in love, by loving others until the end and giving our life for them. There is no other way for us

It is in serving Christ the King in the poor, the prisoner, the sick, the men, women and children who feel rejected, discriminated against, bullied, that we become what we are called to be.

The Kingdom of God is not a reality which will appear like a finished product at the end of time. It is here and now that we are supposed to make it become a reality in our lives.

To the Pharisees, Jesus declares: "The kingdom of God is within you" (Lk 17:21). This kingdom of peace and justice, of respect and life grows in us and around us each time we speak and act in accord with our royal status. The more we are like Christ in his role as servant-king, the more the kingdom spreads in the world.

Is that not what we all long for?

Why is it then that in Belfast, these past weeks, we have seen an increase in racist attacks? Why is it then that the richer in our societies, and even some of royal status, are more interested in tax evasion than in sharing with the poor, and in investing in the common good? Why is it that, in Northern Ireland, we seem to prefer to settle for a political dead end situation rather than to move on and to leave behind bigotry and self-pity?

There is an urgent need for humility, generosity, mutual care, attention and selfless love in our families, communities and world. This is our way to celebrate worthily Christ the King.

St Augustine warns his people with the following words: "If you enter the kingdom, it is not because you have not sinned but because through your almsgiving you have expiated your sins". And then St Augustine explains what "almsgiving" means by quoting our Gospel reading: giving water to those who thirst and food to the hungry, clothing those who are naked and visiting those who are sick and in prison and welcoming the stranger.

May we bear witness to Christ the true and servant King with no other strength than his mercy and no other right than his victorious love.