

## 20141123ChristTheKingSermon

Although perhaps I shouldn't, I like satire – especially satire of things we hold most dear. It knocks off the sentimentality and adds vigour. If it is that important to us and our faith in it is strong, it must be able to withstand a bit of mockery. Religious quips always make me smile. Many years ago when Braam van Straten was still playing fly half for Western Province – for those of you who don't remember Braam, he often saved WP with his goal kicking but not much of a running fly half. I saw some graffiti on the Claremont Bridge nears Newlands Rugby Ground. It read: "What would you do if Jesus came to Cape Town tomorrow?" and in another colour paint was added I presume by another person: "I'd move Braam van Straten to full back". What about those slogans on T-shirts? One I like said, "Jesus loves everyone – but I'm his favourite" – another read; "I have found Jesus - he was down the back of the sofa all the time"; and "Jesus is coming! Quick, look busy".

And it is this last one that rings a bell for the Feast of Christ the King. Knowing it is the Feast of Christ the King, we realise that Jesus is coming because Christmas is just five weeks away. But it also acknowledges that when Jesus comes again it will not be as a baby in a stable but as the King of the Universe; it is really about his final return.

We stand at the precipice of Advent, where the Church, in its lectionary readings, is continually reminding us that he'll be back, and there will be a judgement.

So the Feast of Christ the King is a good time to ask: what do we need to do to look busy – as that T-shirt said? We need to live our lives as Jesus would and to do that we need to have an example to follow, to inspire. I'm sure you all have some of your own ideas of who would inspire you, of course - perhaps a familiar figure from your life; perhaps someone from history. For many they find inspiration in figures such as Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, Gandhi and Martin Luther King jr.

Now it is all very well for us to identify with those people who inspire us to do good things, however, there is a sense in which Jesus is directing our gaze away from them, to those who are wholly uninspiring. You heard the Gospel reading where Jesus says: "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me" (Matt. 25.45). The character we are being asked to form is, one that naturally offers goodness. Actually more than this: it is a life that leaks goodness and kindness to all that come into contact with us. It cannot help its own energy of grace.

Commenting on our Gospel reading today, Simone Weil wrote: "he who gives bread to the famished sufferer, for the love of God, will not be thanked by Christ. He already has his reward in the thought itself. Christ thanks those who do not know to whom they are giving food" (*Waiting on God*, London, Routledge, 1951, pp. 91-2). Weil, in other words, is asking us to reflect on the nature of Christian character. Are we so naturally Christ-like, that grace flows from us in ways that are indiscriminate and boundless, not seeking either attention or reward? It is only when we see the least obvious scrap of humanity who could represent Christ, and answer that we can love them for what they are, not what they represent, nor what potential we may see, that this Christ-likeness is truly born in us.

Where does all this leave us? Very few of us have the opportunity, wisdom or strength to develop such a saintly character. Very few of us can hope to live the exemplary life set out before us in Jesus' words. We know we are to feed the hungry; to visit the prisoner; to welcome the stranger. But so often we fail to live the life God sets out before us; we know our duty - but we have yet to discover the joy. So what can we do? Martyn Percy formerly Principal of Cuddesdon College now Dean of Christchurch Oxford suggest three things.

First, the urgency of Jesus' words in today's Gospel suggests that we have to seek him - seek Jesus. Where? - In the lonely, the persecuted, the hungry, the scorned and the victimized. This is not easy. But we are first and foremost to be seekers of the Christ - Christ the King - in the people and places that the world usually rejects. It is in loving the unloved and unseen that we begin to meet our maker.

Second, grace takes many forms. Jesus merely talks in his parable about noticing, feeding and visiting: simple things. We sometimes need to look for very clear focus of discipleship among ourselves and in our parish, and most especially among others. The gospel at its heart is set on raising up the fallen, the shunned and the oppressed. And we need to be ready to offer love to those who ache and long for a truly human life.

Third, we remember that true religion is love, not reward. It is in giving that we receive; in dying that we are born; love is all there is. One of the rich ironies of our faith is that it is for others. Even our church - it is the only club that exists for non-members, as William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury during WW2 once said. A parish church is the inside place for outsiders; the place of belonging to those who have nowhere to belong.

A popular story from World War Two tells of a Romanian Christian who found himself imprisoned in the concentration camp at Belsen, and deprived of all he needed to sustain his faith: no crucifix, Bible, icons, devotional books, corporate worship or knotted prayer beads. So he prayed in secret - that he might respond to the call of love. He found himself spending time in the camp with the sick, the starving, the diseased, the dying and the betrayers - all those who were shunned by others. One day, as the camp drew close to liberation, an atheist - a priest, in fact, who had his faith shattered by the experience of war - came to see the Romanian and said, "I see how you live here. Tell me about the God you worship." And the Romanian replied: "He is like me."

I wonder which of us could reply: "God is like me". As the Gospels regularly hint, it is the example that makes the difference, not the ideas; the praxis, not the theories. The call to discipleship remains compellingly simple: to be like Jesus to be like him. To love one another as he loves us; to bear fruit that will last; and to love those who have no one to love them. As Jesus says: "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me" (Matt.25.40).

So on the Feast of Christ the King; we stare up at the throne where we expect to see Jesus. But the throne is empty; he himself tells us that we will not find him there. Because he is in prison. He is out there begging for food. He lies defenceless in the cradle, or cold and shivering in the gutter. He lies tortured and dying on the tree. Yes, behold your king. Come, let us serve.

Based on a sermon by Martyn Percy