

Our Lord Jesus Christ, Universal King

Today's end of the year celebration always takes my mind to Jerusalem and to the questioning Jesus experienced before Pontius Pilate. Pilate had to find an excuse for condemning Jesus and picked up on Jesus' mention of his kingdom not being of this world. Pilate asked Jesus outright if he was a king and Jesus replied "You say that I am, for this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth." It did not take Pilate long to conclude that Jesus could be handed over to the Jews and the offence was that he claimed to be a king, thus setting himself against the Roman Emperor. And, as we know only too well from countless images, Jesus was crucified as a king wearing a crown.

So today we honour Jesus as our crucified and universal king. He is King because he is the one, who will hand over to his Father a kingdom freed from sovereignty, authority and power at the end of time and he is in process of gathering and preparing that kingdom throughout time. Jesus is King because he has the power to bring all things to perfection and completion.

As we contemplate Matthew's image in today's Gospel of the King on his throne at the end of time separating people as the shepherd separates sheep from goats, we must hold together the two truths offered us by sacred scripture. That Jesus is both crucified king and universal king, the one who is all in all and Matthew keeps the two in sharp focus in his parable of the sheep and the goats.

If we have failed to listen to the whole of the parable it grabs our attention at the end when the goats on the King's left hand are told that they will go away to eternal punishment and the virtuous to eternal life. Somehow the goats have not remembered that this King is the King of Calvary and the King of the Universe at the same time.

Coming from his experience as the crucified king, Jesus make very clear his criteria for separating the sheep from the goats. Jesus speaks about the least of the brothers, among which number he is included as the crucified, and describes some very clear and specific actions. He mentions hunger, thirst, welcome, nakedness, sickness and imprisonment and says that concrete help given to them is given to him as well.

That list covers pretty well every situation of human need waiting for help and support from another human being. Not only that, the parable presents these actions as of crucial importance. They do not require skill, education or any form of wisdom just a basic human response. A spontaneous response in love which is a direct meeting with God in Christ as the crucified King and which is of absolute and final significance in the work of coming to human fullness, or as we are accustomed to calling it, being saved.

So given that being human involves so much other activity and enjoyment, why is this so crucial? The answer has to do with our fundamental make up and with the nature that is hard wired into us by God. We are created in his image, which means that God himself, revealed in Jesus, is the blueprint for each of us. Not only that, he is the continual way to life worthy of the name and, as today's Gospel makes clear, is the end and completion of all things. As the basic foundation and blueprint for humanity God offers us the way to live, which is the way of his own living. God, who is the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, lives a perpetual life of giving and receiving, responding with gift and gratitude, in perfect love in eternity. Deep and difficult for us to understand but easy to put into action because all we have to do is

to respond to every other human being in respect and love, without exception. Amongst all the experiences of human life, this is most important because this is where we connect with God, this is where we grow to greater humanity and this is where and when we help others to do the same.

Matthew told us at the beginning of his Gospel, that Jesus is Emmanuel, which means 'God with us'. With us, in every moment of life is the Spirit and presence of Jesus. With us so that we might be drawn deeper into him as we eat and drink his body and blood; with us as we continue his work and grow in our humanity by responding in love and respect to fellow human beings; with us ever more clearly in the faces of our brothers and sisters to whom we respond with love, respect, justice and charity.

Today's celebration of Jesus, crucified, risen and universal King, points us in the direction of the completion of creation and the moment in time when Jesus will take humanity with him into the life of God. Our task is always to be aware of the journey on which we have embarked and the destination to which it is leading. That awareness will help us see increasingly that every concrete action brings with it an opportunity to cooperate with the divine process which is creating out of our world and experience the glorious Kingdom that Jesus will hand over to his Father at the end of time. As our Gospel states so clearly, the areas in which we are most effectively to cooperate are very simple and concrete. They do not require skill or great giftedness because they are the basic stuff of relationships. Each of us is given in life a set of relationships where we recognize the difficulty or need of another. All we need do is respond with the kind of respect that accepts the other person as not only gift from God but somehow, the presence of Jesus himself. Out of that respect will come the spontaneous concern and response in love which addresses the need in a way that brings growth and wholeness to the other. Sometimes we will make mistakes, more often than not, like those in the Gospel; we shall not recognize Jesus in the other person. But always, if we act in love, we will be helping prepare that Kingdom of justice, love and peace that Jesus will one day hand over to his Father so that it might live the life of God for ever.