

THE SOLEMNITY OF CHRIST THE KING:

November 26, 2023

The liturgical year comes to a finale with our celebrating the thirty-fourth Ordinary Sunday as the Solemnity of Christ the King. This feast was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 to counter the image of communism as he saw it growing in his day. It was originally placed on the last Sunday of October and then, in the new post-Vatican II calendar designated for this final Sunday of the church year. I have never taken to the image of Jesus as King. It is too patriarchal, dominative, stressing power and dominion. The other image we see today is that of the shepherd. I like this image as a shepherd cares for his sheep, seeks the lost, carries the injured. The sheep come to know their shepherd by name.

I prefer to spend some time with the gospel with you. All this year we have been reading through the gospel of Matthew. Next week, with Advent, we change to a continuous reading of the gospel of Mark. Some of the content is similar to Matthew's but the style and emphasis differ. We believe Matthew wrote for groups of Jewish Christians. He refers to Jesus as the new Moses. The gospel has five main sections reflecting the five books of the Torah. Matthew often refers to Old Testament prophecies which he applies to Jesus.

Last January, when we began to read Matthew, we started with chapter five which starts the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon begins with the Beatitudes. Matthew singles out the people whom Jesus particularly addresses. These are the poor, the meek, the sorrowing, the merciful, the peacemakers, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the pure in heart, those who suffer for the cause of justice. Many people, Christians included, say the Beatitudes are too hazy and theoretical. They are very nice but not practical. Peter Maurin, Dorothy Day's partner in founding the Catholic Worker movement, said that "The Sermon on the Mount will be called practical when Christians make up their mind to practice it." Mahatma Gandhi said he would have become a Christian if he saw that Christians lived this sermon. And Gilbert Keith Chesterton, the British writer, is quoted as saying the problem is not that the gospel has been tried and found lacking, but that it has never been tried. Words for our twenty-first century ears! So we go along with our violence and greed and one war after another and wonder where God is in the midst of it all.

During this past year we have heard Jesus' teachings on the kingdom of heaven, how life on this earth really should be, how love must be the real guiding force in human life. Today we hear the dramatic scenario of the last judgment, how we will answer for our lives. How are the Beatitudes lived out? Not in some heroic

fashion but in everyday caring. The value of our lives will be seen in how we lived and will be evident in our attention to these human qualities and actions: to feed the hungry; to give drink to the thirsty; to welcome a stranger; to clothe the naked; to care for the sick; to visit the prisoner.

And Jesus emphasizes all of this by saying when we do any of these things for the least of his brothers and sisters, and that would include the most unworthy and deserving, we do it for Jesus. Nor, in this picture of the last judgement, does our Lord ask us whether we know the catechism or not and whether we keep all the church laws. No, it is our lifestyle that he credits us for.

The Lord does not demand any kind of heroic behavior but only how we integrate giving to others in our daily life and thus building the kingdom of heaven. We begin in small ways when we are children. We keep on giving, even as old and limited people when we can join the crucified Jesus in offering our suffering for others. We can all give in our own ways.

Recently a visiting nurse told me something of her life growing up in Boston. She expressed her gratitude for her parents who taught their children how to give. She remembers them bringing her and her siblings to the Pine Street Inn either on Thanksgiving or Christmas (I can't remember which) and recognizing those who do not enjoy what she does. Another family does it differently. I received a picture of parents and two children with the caption, "This is our world". It made me think and hope that was not just their entire world. Yes, in a way, our family is our world, but this world fits into a bigger egg, a bigger world of local neighborhood. This world then belongs to our church and country and beyond. We are not here for the world to serve us but for us to serve the world.

The gospel of today and many other days as well emphasizes our connection to all human beings, to the natural world, to the cosmos. If we claim to be followers of Christ, we are reminded that our reason for being on this earth is not to be comfortable but to learn to love and give. The Sermon on the Mount and the last judgement scene sum up what that means day by day.

When we look in the face of each other, as well as the stranger and the alien, let us keep in mind the words of Jesus, "Whatever you did for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did for me."

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