

Reflection for Christ the King

November 22nd - 2020

In the midst of a difficult period it's good to have a feast like "Christ the King" to cheer us up a bit and take us forward to Advent and Christmas – whatever that will be like this year?

However, it is also a difficult theme because of its overtones of male chauvinism and hierarchical power. I think we have largely come to a point where the gender of God and perhaps even the gender of Jesus, is not a big issue. God's power on the hand might be a little harder to understand. Ezekiel gives us a picture of God's power as the power a shepherd has for the sheep, concerned only for the welfare of the flock. Paul's letter to the Ephesians puts God on a throne, not only for us in the present, but for all eternity. Paul tells us that God's power is revealed in the resurrection and is a power which enriches our lives.

The well-known parable in the Gospel reading picks up this theme of God on the throne as the cosmic judge, saving some and condemning others. It's often used as a cautionary tale and to paint a picture of heaven and hell in some last act of judgement. If you are like me, when you hear this reading, you end up feeling guilty and maybe even as a lost cause, but I don't think that is what this parable is about. Firstly, note verse 40, "what you did to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me". Who are "members of my family?", surely, we are, because we are people of the faith and disciples of Jesus Christ, so this parable is not for us but for the world.

Secondly, those people who showed compassion, selflessness, openness to others and charity in its broadest sense will be welcomed into God's kingdom even though they are not disciples. I find this very encouraging as I find it hard to believe that generous self-giving people will be excluded from God's kingdom. I find it equally hard to believe in a God who condemns good people. A Methodist minister I once knew said one day "My father was not a Christian so does that mean he will not be in heaven and I will? If it does then it will not be heaven for me!" This parable of the Great Assize is a wonderfully inclusive story and not the rather severe judgement it is often taken to be. Thirdly what about those who go away to eternal punishment? Notice they go away and not

sent. When I was once a collector for Christian Aid in Christian Aid week, I knocked on a door which was opened by a very respectable lady who said “We don’t give” and closed the door again! Now I don’t actually believe her, because I’m sure she did give in some way or another, but if it was true, then what a miserable and lonely and sad life she must have been leading, she would have already gone away into a form of hell and only some radical change in her outlook could have redeemed her situation. Perhaps some people never make that change and life remains dead and cold for an eternity, but the righteous have eternal life, now and always.

In all this I think I am saying that we must be careful with this parable and that the power of God seems less like a judge or king sitting on a throne and more like the power of a loving mother or father who walks alongside their children, not forcing themselves on their children or giving them unasked for advice but supporting their children through the difficult times, helping them when they ask for help, celebrating with them in times of joy and always being there for them. For me that is the power of the cross and the power of the risen Christ, that Jesus knows our sufferings and difficulties because he suffered as well, that Jesus went through that suffering to new life and with Jesus we can do the same, that following Jesus, being his disciples and therefore part of his kingdom, gives us hope and faith and love and life in all its fullness; and who wouldn’t want that? May Christ be king in our hearts and lives, today and always.

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