

Our Lord Jesus Christ, Universal King.

Year A

'Christ, The King.'

*Christ is a King on the model of the Homeric kings who called themselves 'shepherds of the people'.
As a royal shepherd he is leading us to the Kingdom of his Father.*

(Readings: Ezekiel 34: 11-12, 15-17.1 Corinthians 15: 20-26, 28. Matthew 25: 31-46.)

In today's Gospel St Matthew gives us something of an apocalyptic vision of the Last Judgement. It is a vision in which all the nations, without distinction between Jew and Gentile; without discrimination between priest and people, are all assembled before the King. That said, it would be a great pity if we were to limit the value of this passage to a mere 'Last Judgement' scene. And it would be a pity because, what this passage offers, most especially, is a vivid picture of the kind of community in which Jesus sees himself as having been wholly recognised; where he is recognised as the King of that community, and in which Jesus is very much at home.

But for now, the presence of Jesus is hidden among the poor, and it is hidden among the vulnerable. Even so, whenever, and wherever, their needs are recognised, and more particularly, where they are responded to, Jesus' presence is acknowledged.

When the hungry are fed, when those who thirst are given drink, when strangers are offered hospitality, when the naked are covered in dignity, when the sick are nursed and cared for, when prisoners are visited, Jesus himself is touched by mercy. – Their vulnerability is his vulnerability. And he is personally present where human need is at its greatest.

In accordance with Matthew's vision, if an alien were to come from outer space, and ask us where Jesus might be found we would, most properly, take him or her (*or it*) to obscure, out of the way sanctuaries, or into any one of the many, pathetically overcrowded refugee camps dotted around our world. We could take our alien visitor along dark forbidding back alleys, or into sprawling over-lit and multi-warded hospitals, or into drab unwelcoming, overcrowded prisons.

We would have to tell our visitor that Jesus is to be found somewhere in these places. And we would have to explain that the 'blesséd' of God are to be found there, feeding, welcoming, clothing, visiting, paying attention.

Clearly, then, in Matthew's vision we also have a reasonably comprehensive list of human needs. And with that, we have an equally comprehensive list of appropriate human responses; responses made by a properly concerned and caring community.

Now, none of these human needs are specifically, or exclusively religious, although of course, they exist there as well. Rather, they are the simple, basic needs of all humanity, needs which range as far and as wide as the human heart itself.

To each and every one of those human needs, there is the right and proper response of the Kingdom. And that response is an authentically human one. Therefore, it is a profoundly religious one, honoured by the title, "Blesséd of my Father".

The ‘Blesséd’ are praised for the simplest of actions to those who experience simple human needs. And they are *actions* not *attitudes*. There are no records of great heroism; no stories of conquest, of great trials or sufferings; no marvellous triumphs over disaster; no feats of imaginative daring.

The requirements are simple, which is to say, they are not beyond the most basic, ordinary human capacity. There is no special training, or any particular qualifications. The actions are the simple response of those who pay attention to what happens in the world, and who move to answer the needs that confront them.

For Jesus, what happens in the world of the ‘familiar’ has an eternal importance. Little acts of kindness have an abiding significance. Human graciousness and charity are grounds enough for a welcome into the fullness of the kingdom.

Those who are blesséd are not conscious of having done any special service to Jesus. – “When did we...?” – They merely responded with mercy to those in need, without thought beyond the response itself.

At the end of Matthew’s ‘Mission’ discourse, Jesus declares that any kind of service done to his apostles would be rewarded, as done to him and, indeed, to God:

“Anyone who welcomes you, welcomes me; and those who welcome me, welcome the one who sent me... If anyone gives so much as a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is a disciple, then I tell you solemnly, he will most certainly not lose his reward.” (*Matthew 10: 40, 42*)

In today’s Gospel, that thought is extended to embrace “one of the least of these brothers of mine”, which is to say, to everyone. Plainly, as far as Jesus is concerned, any kindness done to a person who is in any kind of need, however lowly he or she may be, Jesus considers it as being a kindness done to him self.

But what of the ‘Goats’ – those set on his left – who are cursed to ‘go away to eternal punishment’? In short, they bring doom upon themselves. And they do so because they fail to respond to simple needs.

They are not accused of any hideously violent crimes, or of great or terrible offences, in the same way that the blesséd are not praised for heroic virtue. Where they are accused, it is because they have failed to act on the human need they saw before them.

Both the blesséd and the cursed share the self-same question; “When did we...?”

And that is our question too, for time after time, we see the legion of our brothers and sisters, God’s children, in real, desperate need. The Gospel asks us to interpret what we see. And it challenges us to see the broken body of Christ in the affliction and suffering of those around the world, and more immediately, around us.

Christ continues to suffer in the hungry, and in the thirsty, in so many places around our world. He continues to be afflicted along with the stranger and the naked; with the sick and the imprisoned. To pay attention to them is to pay attention to Christ’s own disfigured, broken body. And to do that, is to be welcomed as ‘blesséd of God’; to be welcomed, because it is to live as a community of mercy.

“In so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.”