

## **The 34<sup>th</sup> (& Last) Sunday of Year C: Christ is our King – but of what sort?**

**1st Reading: 2 Samuel 5:1-3: David anointed as King of Israel;**

**2nd Reading: Colossians 1:11-20: God's Son is eternal, but 'died' as one of us;**

**Gospel: Luke 23:35-43: Jesus' is a Kingship of mercy – the good thief.**

In the 1970's, many new hymns were written – some good, some poor, some truly awful. One of those which struck me as amazing was by a local lady, Estelle White. It is called “Christ is our King; let the whole world rejoice” and the tune sounds like what you could hear at a fairground carousel, where children ride ‘horses’, going up and down. (I won't make any further comment!) The third verse runs: “He came to open the doors of the jail / He came to help the downtrodden and frail / Freedom is waiting for all those who hope / He is the light of the world.” In fairness, that matches exactly the theme of this Sunday's gospel: Jesus on the cross, having been insulted by a soldier about being “King of the Jews”, promises to the ‘good’ thief, “Today, you will be with me in Paradise”. This is a true opening of the doors of a spiritual ‘jail’.

I think it is worth mentioning briefly what this feast is all about. In the 1920's, in the aftermath of the First World War, Pope Pius XI wanted to celebrate what true authority should be like – a guarantee of service, justice and peace. The slaughter of 1914-18 had been caused, among other things, by the actions of warlike European governments – Germany, Austria-Hungary, Serbia, Russia, etc. They were autocratic countries, with their rulers being part of the problem, so the Pope's idea was to promote peace and justice by calling Jesus Christ our very own “King”. The only time in the gospel when he actually claimed to be a king was before Pilate (John 18:36-38 – the Year B gospel for this feast); on that occasion, he said his kingdom was about “bearing witness to the truth”. That was hardly a warlike or authoritarian view of kingship – especially as he was under guard at the time he said it. However, I must admit that history shows many church and civic leaders to have used strong-arm tactics enforcing what they defined as “truth” – with no permission to disagree!

The first reading refers to the anointing of David as King over all the tribes of Israel, about 1000 BC. He was idolised in the Old Testament as an ideal ruler (even though he had many obvious failings as a human being). As a result, Jesus, as the future Messiah, had to be linked - even if distantly, and in a merely legal fashion - to the same clan as David. His mother Mary was married to Joseph, who was “of David's house and line”. However important Jesus' link with David might have been to Biblical theology, his life and teaching show a totally different

mind-set from the authoritarian and somewhat corrupt style of David and the Jewish kings who followed him, centuries earlier.

This is because Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God always stresses mercy, peace-making and love. His use of the phrase "Kingdom of God" does not mean a physical place, but a relationship with his Father – whenever God's presence is allowed to influence how we believe and act. That is the sort of Kingdom implied in the feast this weekend. In Jesus' words to Pilate in John 18:36, his is "not a kingdom of this world" – otherwise he would not have found himself condemned to die on Calvary. Yet his death on the cross is the ultimate symbol of God the Father's love for us, so that even the worst sinner can be reconciled and redeemed. This is the ultimate 'get-out-of-jail card'.

So, what practical difference can this weekend's feast make to us? I think that firstly, it should convince us of God's mercy. 'Mercy' in fairly short supply just now, especially with war in Eastern Europe - and Somalia, where it makes the famine and chaos endemic to that African country even worse. Ultimately, Jesus' words to the 'good' thief offer hope to you and me, when we fall short of the standard we know we should have. It reminds us that, despite the problems of our Church, she still offers an image of a God who is full of love & compassion. Without those, there is little hope to be had in the modern world.

The second difference, I suggest, is that it challenges us to look seriously at how we behave in relation to others. Are we like the other ('non-good'?) thief and the soldier, who both mocked Jesus in his plight on the cross? One did it from a position of weakness; the other from a position of strength, but the effect was the same – "If you are so clever, save yourself..." How often do we (whether we are successful or not) disparage others in their plight? It's very easy to use sarcasm & mockery when others try something and appear to fail.

As usual, St Paul offers a good comment in the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading. He writes of Jesus as "the image of the unseen God", through whom everything was created. This divine being, who existed from eternity, became one of us, so that we in the Church are his "Body", while he is our "Head". This was not just power-politics; it was to allow everything to be reconciled with God through him – "when he made peace by his death on the cross". All Christian theology comes back to Jesus' crucifixion, and the resurrection that followed. This is the proof that God is on our side – wanting to save us, not cause damnation. Let's rejoice!

*Fr Jim Dunne.*