Christ the Universal King – Year A

The feast of Christ the King was instituted by Pope Pius IX in 1925 in response to the world's growing secularism, nationalism, political instability and hostility to the Church. The feast was to serve as a reminder that earthly kingdoms come and go but the spiritual reign of Christ lasts forever.

A thread running through today's readings is the reversal of worldly values that Jesus Christ represents. He is king who reigns through love, mercy, justice and service, rather than domination or worldly power. He is the shepherd who reaches out to the vulnerable and calls us to do likewise. He is the saviour who has conquered death and invites us into life.

Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17 The prophet presents God as the shepherd being touched by the scattering of his flock. The actual historical background here is the exile of the Jerusalem population in Babylon – an exile that lasted around 70 years. The Jewish population were not slaves but were captives in a foreign city who were devastated by the destruction of their city, Jerusalem, and their Temple.

In defeat they began to wonder if their God was less powerful than the Babylonian gods and maybe they should turn and submit to the Babylonian religion. The prophets of the period spoke out powerfully in defence of Israel's god. They were Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the anonymous Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55).

The weak will be made strong and tears will be wiped away.

In today's reading from Ezekiel we get a feel for hope and restoration. God is the shepherd of Israel who will inject a new heart and a new spirit into the discouraged exiles. The weak will be made strong and tears will be wiped away.

The last verse in today's extract reminds us that self-serving shepherds, i.e., the rich and powerful in Israel, had led their people astray by allowing corruption and the worship of other gods in the land. Ezekiel is promising that they will be held to account and the disadvantaged who had remained faithful would be rewarded with new life and prosperity. This is a reference to the separation of the sheep from the goats.

Psalm 23 Probably the most familiar of all the psalms this poetic gem picks up the theme of God the shepherd of Israel who cares deeply for the faithful sheep. What rarely gets comment is the fact that sheep are generally known to be ignorant and obstinate. Is there an intentional comparison here with human nature and its propensity to go its own way and cling to wrong-headedness?

Whatever the case, this masterpiece points us to an intimate communion with the eternal God that is really beyond human imagination. Certainly Christ the shepherd goes all out to provide the best for the sheep who, with faithfulness and trust, appreciate what is on offer.

1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28 Paul points out to the Corinthian community that Christ is the risen king who has overcome all enemies that stand for evil and corruption. The final enemy is death, and Christ has overcome death.

He presents Christ's victory over death as a kind of 'first instalment' of the gift of the Holy Spirit that we are now entitled to receive. Paul refers to ***Adam*** as both an individual and a corporate entity. As humans we are all included in the concept of *Adam.* However, Paul argues that because we have committed ourselves to Christ we are 'in Christ' as he puts it. This places us in solidarity with Christ and this means we share with him the reality of the resurrection of the dead.

The corollary is that our commitment to living the values of Christ is our part in sharing in this resurrection. If we can be attentive to the hidden presence of Christ in ordinary daily encounters we are signing on to the fact that love is the measure of greatness.

Matthew 25:31-46 This passage is Matthew's dramatic representation of the final judgment. Although it contains parabolic imagery it is more accurately a description of the judgment scene. It is unlike a parable, which is a fictional story designed to illuminate a spiritual truth. The only parable element here is the king separating the sheep from the goats.

They didn't expect to meet Christ in human vulnerability

We are generally familiar with the details in this scene and understand its point, but there are some challenging aspects that need highlighting. The first is that none of the human characters, neither the good guys nor the failures, actually recognised Christ in the people they encountered in life. They might have expected to meet him in church, in the sacraments or moments of prayer , but not in human vulnerability. 'When did we see you in some poor wretch who needed a lift, a helping hand, even a word of encouragement?' Christ is definitely in the unexpected. Doesn't every human interaction become an encounter with Christ?

Secondly, notice how the 'unrighteous' are not accused of violence, dishonesty or deliberate cruelty. They are judged for their failure to act with compassion. They allowed human suffering to go unanswered – not with malice but with indifference.

The unmerciful ones in Jesus' scenario are condemned for their failure to show compassion

The mature Christ follower doesn't ask, 'Have I done anything wrong?' but goes beyond that to ask, 'What good have I failed to do?' The unmerciful ones in Jesus' scenario are condemned for their failure to step up and put themselves out by responding with compassion. Shades, here, of the priest and Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan!

In any relationship indifference becomes the kiss of death

A third issue is indifference. Indifference is not compatible with authentic discipleship. In so many ways the opposite of love is not hatred but indifference. In any relationship indifference becomes the kiss of death. What a pity it would be if we become so absorbed in our responsibilities, ambitions, comforts and concerns that the suffering of others becomes invisible to us. Are we attentive to those that society overlooks? And isn't Jesus saying here that nobody should be overlooked?

A final thing that should be noticed is that Jesus is speaking of concrete things. Nothing airy-fairy or abstract in this piece. He speaks about food, water, clothing, hospitality, sickness and imprisonment. Good intentions don't get a mention. Genuine discipleship shows in the way we respond to the needs of others. Surely our faith should compel us to be attentive and compassionate. Remember com-passion means 'suffering with,' that is, your pain in my heart – and I am willing to do something about it.



A kind gesture can reach a wound that only compassion can heal.

Steve Maraboli. American behavioural scientist, author, decorated military veteran.



A young newly ordained priest, nervous while giving his first homily, became alarmed to notice that practically nobody was paying attention.

He stopped to call out, 'Can you hear me alright down the back?'

'Not very well,' came a distant voice – whereupon everyone in the first 10 rows got up and moved down the back.

Laurie Woods