

Reflection for November 22, 2020

The King of Love

When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

We place our hope in God.

We sing of a life beyond life

and a future good beyond imagining:

a new heaven and a new earth,

the end of sorrow, pain, and tears,

Christ's return and life with God,

the making new of all things.

We yearn for the coming of that future,

even while participating in eternal life now.

May the peace of the Lord be with you always.

Let us pray:

O God, we thank you for the sheer drama, excitement and wonder of existence. We can never get used to the unexpected miracle of grace when we receive from you so much more than we could ever hope for in ways which we were not able to foresee. We know what it is to experience the exhilaration and embarrassment of feeling so good when we have responded to the sudden impulse to reach out to meet the needs of others. We are thankful for our physical being—for energy released from food, for the joy of physical skills, climbing upstairs, or threading a needle, or running to soothe a crying child. We express our gratitude for the many beautiful moments experienced in our lives—sunsets and northern lights, the sound of a symphony, the call of a night bird, the scent of a rose, the aroma of coffee. Show us what we must do. Make us ready to accept the inconvenience and sacrifice necessary if we are to survive. Give us now a steadfast intention to reach out actively to do your will, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

There is a tale told about young Martin Luther. In a school book he saw a picture of Christ perched on a rainbow, consigning the wicked to torment and the righteous to bliss with a flick of his finger. And Luther trembled. Can you blame him? Call it poetry, or myth, or a nightmare left over from an excitable age, and you still can't laugh it away. Perhaps within each one of us there lives an inarticulate dread, the feeling that someday, somewhere, somehow there will be a final accounting. No wonder the parable of the Last Judgment troubles us.

As David Buttrick warns: "We will not be judged by a rule book banked in heaven, kept to the last, and unlocked for a list of our sins, but by Jesus' own call to love, to show mercy, to care not a little but a lot." Do you wonder why both groups of people are surprised? "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison?"

“Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.” Jesus is pointing to people we see everyday.

The righteous were just as surprised. “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?” They did not even know they had served the Lord. For them, no religious motives were involved, no chasing for reward. If they fed a hungry person, it was because he or she was hungry. If they visited a lonely person, it was because that person was lonely. The parable seems to be calling to us a simple “love” of our neighbours. We are to love our neighbours because they are neighbours.

Elaine Pagels in a commentary on this parable notes that in the 2nd century C.E., a plague had ravaged cities and towns throughout the Roman empire. The usual response to someone suffering from inflamed skin and pustules, whether a family member or not, was to run, since nearly everyone infected died in agony. Some epidemiologists estimate that the plague killed a third to a half of the imperial population. Doctors could not, of course, treat the disease, and they too fled the deadly virus. But some Christians were convinced that God’s power was with them to heal or alleviate suffering. They shocked their pagan neighbours by staying to care for the sick and dying, because that, if they themselves should die, they had the power to overcome death. Such convictions became the practical basis of a radical new social structure. “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” What God requires is that human beings love one another and offer help—even, or especially, to the neediest.

It is because Jesus rules from the cross that he rules in eternity. When we have seen Jesus on the cross, we know how to recognize him in

other places. Where people suffer and die, there we see Jesus. Where people are left alone, and the people they have loved and trusted are gone away, there we see him. Where people are left on the fringes by the prejudices of those who think they are at the centre, there we see him. Where people bear the brunt of evil they did not create, there we see him. Where people who stand for justice and truth are laughed at for their convictions, there we see him. Where our blindness hides the truth; where our sin causes suffering; where our indifference allows evil to flourish; there too we see him.

Christ the King Sunday is the last word of the Christian year. This Sunday was first celebrated in 1925, when the world was still reeling from World War I and dictators were laying the foundations for World War II. So the church sent a bold statement on the last Sunday of the Christian year, saying, "Do what you will, but Jesus Christ will have the final word." God promises to restore the people who are shoved to the margins of despair, to a place of strength, love, and protection. Those who consume others with their mistreatment and injustice will themselves be consumed. As Brian Erickson observes, "Today we proclaim to the world that Christ is our king. He is our king when hope seems lost, that voice we will listen to when promises seem shattered, when our lives have no direction, and when we can't imagine anything tomorrow could bring that might fill this hole within us. This is the great now-and-not-yet of Christian life, that we celebrate a victory the world cannot see, a hope that defies every instinct, a king enthroned on a cross. Therefore we need not be afraid of any power this world can wrangle, for Christ gets the last word."

Christ the King is thus a feast of change and renewal in the world and the church. In a non-monarchical society like ours, 'Christ the King' thus becomes the symbol of unrest in an established order, the symbol of justice and peace for those who experience injustice and have no

peace, with the hope that he 'will wipe away all tears from their eyes, for the former things are past' (Revelation 21:1-5).

Let us pray:

Mighty and tender God, voice of the voiceless, power of the powerless: we praise you for your vision of a community of wholeness, a realm of peace, in which all who hunger and thirst are nourished, in which the stranger is welcomed, the hurting are healed, and the captive set free. Guide us by your truth and love, until we and all your people make manifest your reign of justice and compassion. We offer our gifts to you: as food and drink for a hungry world; as clothing and shelter for those who are naked and homeless; as kindness and compassion for those who are most in need of mercy. Transform our gifts, that they might be your hands and feet in the world. Send us forth as your people, that all that we do, and all that we say, may be a glorious representation of your presence in the world. We pray, with gratitude, in the name of your anointed one, our servant-king, to whom with you and the Spirit, one Holy God, be honour, glory and blessing this day and forever. Amen.

Rev. Bill Cantelon