

**Christ the King – 34<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**  
**Matthew 25:31-46**

Looking down the pages of history, we find that kings and rulers aren't usually the most shining examples of faith, goodness, and compassionate love. In the passage from Ezekiel, the prophet has been called precisely because of the abusive mistreatment of God's people by Israel's kings.

At that time, kings were often referred to as 'shepherds,' but instead of serving the people, these leaders exploited the people and the nation had become dispersed. Now the people were in desperate need of God's help.

It takes no imagination to recognise self-seeking ambition being played out today by some rulers. And even in leaders who may not be corrupt and blatantly greedy, we seldom see in them obvious examples of servanthood and compassion. When we do, they stand out as rare exceptions.

Then we hear Jesus' words in Matthew 25, in which he completely turns the idea of kingship and rule upside down. He redefines everything we know about kingship, to the point that it's nearly unrecognizable.

Here's a king sitting on his throne, busy executing judgment over the nations. What's being judged are the attitudes and priorities (in other words, government policy) that lead either to neglect of those in need, or to their compassionate care. And that's a question that we have a right and a duty to ask of those who govern us. Though we must also ask that question of ourselves. What is our attitude towards the last, the lost, and the least in our society?

It's all very well for us to wag our finger at politicians – at the political and economic queens and kings of our society – but as with all change, change must start with me – with us – with our own attitudes, choices, and behaviours.

But what is this new kingdom that Jesus is promoting? Just a few chapters before this story, Jesus says that he's come 'not to be served but to serve.' Service is at the heart of his calling and mission. So it is for those who would follow him. The ministry we were called to when we were baptised is to continue Jesus' servant ministry in the world. And he leaves us in no doubt about what this means.

The hungry are fed, the thirsty are given water, strangers and those on the margins are welcomed, the naked are given clothing, the sick are taken care of, and prisoners are visited. In other words, everyone who is poor, hungry, outcast, sick, or despised is treated with love and dignity – not with nice words, but in real, tangible ways. This is God's Kingdom and this is, it seems to me, in large part, what we pray for whenever we say, 'your kingdom come, your will be done.'

There's a surprise in this. Whenever these things happen, whenever the poor are clothed, the hungry are fed, the sick are tended to, the outcasts are welcomed, the 'least of these – members of my family' (as Jesus calls them) are cared for – but more than that – we learn that we're not only caring for them, we're actually caring for Jesus. And whenever we don't do those things, we're neglecting Jesus.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta brought this truth home. She was often asked, 'How can you keep serving the poor, the sick, and the dying with such vigour? What's your secret?' Mother Teresa would answer, 'Whenever I meet someone in need, it's really Jesus in his most distressing disguise. It's him I help.' Think about that... What would happen if we saw Jesus in others, even in his most distressing disguises?

The king we claim to follow – who we sing about and worship today – tells us that we'll see him in the people we least expect, and he won't look anything like an earthly ruler or leader. But then, we shouldn't be surprised by this, because our king is the kind of king who shows up in these surprising, unexpected ways... in the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the sick, the hurting, the lonely, the prisoner, and the despised.

I readily admit, I find this rather disconcerting. I don't always want to find Jesus among these sisters and brothers of his. But then, when I wish to turn away, and I remember... here is Jesus – I'm gifted. I'm gifted with the very presence of our Lord Jesus Christ.

A favourite saint of mine is a 4<sup>th</sup> century character by the name of Martin of Tours. He was a soldier, but his commitment to Christ came into conflict with his military role. He was, what we call a conscientious objector, and this led to him being discharged from the army. That was the occasion of a famous story about him.

On an intensely cold winter day, as he was entering a city, a beggar stopped Martin and asked for money. Martin had none, but the beggar was blue and shivering with cold, and Martin gave him what he had. He took off his soldier's coat, worn and frayed as it was, and cut it in two and gave half of it to the beggar. That night Martin had a dream. In it he saw the heavenly places and all the angels and Jesus among them; and Jesus was wearing half of a Roman soldier's cloak. One of the angels said to him, 'Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak? Who gave it to you?' And Jesus answered, 'My servant Martin gave it to me.'

*Alister Hendery  
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