

## **Feast of Christ the King: November 26, 2017**

### **“Seeing Christ the King in the Other”**

In the Gospel of Mark, the first words out of Jesus’ mouth when he begins his ministry are a bit cryptic: “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). “The kingdom of God is at hand.” These are strange words, confusing words, and one wonders what his hearers would have made of them. And yet this reference to the “kingdom of God” is just one of many, many references to this kingdom in the gospels. There is nothing Jesus refers to more frequently than the “kingdom of God” or the “kingdom of heaven,” and many of his parables and his teachings revolve around having his disciples and hearers understand of what this kingdom consists.

At the university where I teach, undergraduate students are required to take an introductory theology class. When it comes time to talk about the person and message of Jesus, I focus on the emphasis Jesus placed on the kingdom of God during his ministry. When I ask my students about what images come to mind when they hear “kingdom of God,” they refer primarily to pearly gates and streets paved with gold. To them, the kingdom of God means heaven, the afterlife.

My students aren’t wrong. They’re also not entirely right. While the kingdom of God certainly does refer to heaven, Jesus doesn’t limit the kingdom of God only to heaven, as if it is something that we have to wait to experience. No, Jesus says that

“the kingdom of God is at hand,” meaning that it is something very near. And what becomes clear as we read the gospels is that Jesus understood himself to be inaugurating the kingdom of God on this earth. He understood that this kingdom could and should be experienced here and now, even if it is to come to fruition most fully in the next life.

Why all this talk about the kingdom of God in this homily? Today we celebrate the Feast of Christ the King, a feast we always celebrate on the last Sunday of Ordinary Time, the Sunday before the beginning of Advent. To understand what it means to honor Christ’s kingship, to comprehend what it entails to call Christ our ‘King,’ we need to come to grips with what Jesus meant when he talked about the kingdom of God and about what it means for him to inaugurate the kingdom of God in this world.

I want to propose to you that Jesus did not just come to earth solely that we might attain eternal salvation. Obviously, this salvation was absolutely central to his mission, but interwoven into this mission was Jesus’ desire that we live out that salvation in community with others. To say that Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of God on this earth is to say that Jesus set up a community of his followers that lives by a different logic than the logic governing the world. Whereas in this world, the most important people are those who have the most power, wealth and influence, Jesus inaugurates a kingdom in which “the last shall be first and the first shall be last”

(Matthew 20:16). One in which the poor and the suffering are given place of pride, and in which generous love is to be the hallmark of our relationships with one another.

Next week we celebrate the First Sunday of Advent and so commence our time of preparation for the birth of Christ on Christmas. There is a kind of deep wisdom in the liturgical choice to celebrate the Feast of Christ the King the week before we begin Advent. By having us celebrate this Feast today, the Church is telling us that Christ's kingship cannot be separated from his incarnation, and particularly from the divine humility manifested by his birth. Christ's kingship didn't begin with loud shouts of acclamation or with exuberant celebration. Rather, his kingship began humbly in a barn surrounded by the braying of animals. And if we believe as we do that God chose this humble path to become human, then we understand that the kingdom being established by God-made-man is a kingdom rooted in the humility of generous love.

We learn more about the kingdom of God by looking at the kind of people Jesus associated with during his ministry. Jesus quite consciously chose not to hang out with the elites, but instead, chose to surround himself with the disempowered, the scorned and the hurting. At a time when tax collectors were viewed as traitorous thieves meriting nothing but hatred, Jesus consciously befriends and eats with them. At a time, like all times, when the poor were second-class citizens, Jesus himself becomes poor, entering into their poverty, and giving them an identity rooted in God's loving care. At a time when women were excluded from power and were understood to be less than men,

women were given central places in Jesus' community. And at a time when the sick were shunned and sometimes ostracized, Jesus welcomed them and made them whole.

Which brings us to the gospel passage chosen for us on this Christ the King Sunday. In this passage Jesus talks about what will happen when he returns in judgement and about how he will judge. Jesus tells his disciples that, when he returns, he will sit on his throne as king and separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will then look at those on his right, welcoming them into the eternal kingdom he has prepared for them with the following words: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me." And when the people tell him that they had never done those things for him personally, Jesus will say, "I say to you, whatever you did for one of the least brothers of mine, you did for me."

Jesus tells us in this text that our place in God's kingdom is directly related to the degree to which we endeavor to live out that kingdom here on earth, that we will be made citizens of the eternal kingdom if we have worked to make that kingdom present in our lives. And the way in which we live out the kingdom of God on earth, Jesus tells us, is to see Christ in *everyone* – the hungry, the thirsty, the indigent, the foreigner and the sick – and to treat them accordingly.

There is a plaque on a street corner in Louisville, Kentucky, which is where I live. It commemorates an experience a famous monk, Thomas Merton, had in the spring of 1958. For whatever reason, Merton was in Louisville and away from his monastery. While walking downtown, in what he describes as the shopping district, Merton had something like a vision and he came to experience a profound love for the people walking around him. While he doesn't describe how or why this experience of love occurred, he does say that this vision forever transformed how he viewed others. He came to see his fellow humans as God sees them, to see them as immeasurably loved. He came to see them as so loved by God that God decided to become a human being, to become one of us. And he writes:

it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really *are*. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.

And in seeing them as God sees them, Merton recognized that his own existence was inextricably bound to theirs: "[T]hey are not 'they' but my own self. There are no strangers!"

I bring this vision up in relation to the gospel passage for today because it gets to the heart of what it means to live out our identity as members of the kingdom of God. The incarnation of the Word made flesh, which we will celebrate at Christmas, reveals

to us a God who loves humanity so profoundly as to become one of us. What Merton experienced was an overwhelming comprehension of divine love, and as he gazed on those around him, he came to see them, not just as fellow human beings, but as people with a profound dignity whose value in God's eyes is immeasurable. This vision changed Merton and led him to devote the rest of his life working for justice, hoping that all could understand the depth of God's love for all humanity.

The work we do for others in this world is, therefore, vitally important, even though it may be exhausting and difficult. Christ tells us in the gospel text for today that the work you do for others is work that makes the kingdom of God present. His challenge for us, and it is the challenge that Merton gives as well, is to root our work for others in a profound love for them. With God's assistance, we must strive to view others as God sees them, and so endeavor to see the "secret beauty of their hearts." In short, we are to care for others as we would care for Christ himself. In so doing, you make Christ's kingdom present and actual in this world.