

Christ the King Sunday

22 November 2020

Compassionate Service the New Measure.

Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

Today's Sunday goes by the name of Christ the King. I grew up with a very strange idea about royalty. You see my grandad was very sick. In order to ease the news of his forthcoming demise, dad took me aside. "Grandad is going to Princess Margaret," he explained, "people sometimes die when they go to Princess Margaret." I remember thinking, "Who is this Princess that people go and see and who kills grandads?" It was years later, of course, that I realized that it was a hospital named after the Princess Margaret.

I wonder what images and ideas this title of Christ the King evokes in your mind. Set aside by Pope Pius the 6th in 1925, it is a Sunday kept by Romans Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans and some odd Presbyterians.

Just as I had a weird idea about royalty, so too the first hearers of today's gospel would have found it very odd.

Matthew is giving us a vision of the return of Jesus. Like a King he is pictured sitting on a throne of glory. So far so traditional, he is pictured judging the nations, so far so good, but then something very odd indeed happens. The criteria for judging is totally new.

He is separating the sheep and goats (sheep and goats looked the same back then) but he is not judging them on wealth as the measure of success.

It was a widely held belief that you could tell how blessed a person was by how rich they were. We are much more sophisticated than that of course! Rather than riches, Jesus the King is judging on the basis of something totally different.

“Come,” he says to the blessed, “for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me 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.”

The measure of success was not wealth but compassionate action. Whenever the hungry are fed, the thirsty quenched, the stranger welcomed, the naked clothed, the sick cared for, the prisoner visited, Jesus finds the lifestyle he is looking for.

Jesus is an upside-down King. He judges not on appearance or status but on the depth of kindness.

Compassion, kindness, love these are the new measures of Jesus’ upside-down Kingdom.

But how can we grow to be more compassionate?

For 500 years, many Christians have been practising what is called the Examen. The Examen is a simple exercise we can do at the end of a busy day. It's kind of an audit if you like accounting.

We ask ourselves 3 questions.

1. Who was Christ to me today?
2. Who was I Christ to today?
3. How could I have better been Christ today?

The day I wrote this sermon, I asked myself these three questions. It was a Saturday.

Who was Christ to me? That was easy. Kofe brought around a plate of food following a Tongan feast in the hall. I don’t know what they were celebrating, but it was amazing food. Anyone who brings food to the vicarage is Christ to me! Kofe was Christ to me that day.

Who was I Christ to? Well, this takes a bit of humility to admit to ourselves that we can be Christ to someone else. But someone rang me to tell me how sick they were. I listened and I think I was Christ to them.

How could I have been Christ better? Again, this is pretty searching, but there is a man who constantly comes around asking for money. I gave him a very short no. I don't give out money at the vicarage for lots of reasons. They tell their mates and sometimes people break in looking for money plus, I didn't have any. But I could have offered him some food instead.

Over time this simple exercise has the power to help us grow more Christlike. And this is the goal of the Christian life. Not to beat ourselves up but to ask ourselves what would Jesus do.

In Jesus kingdom, the symbols of office are no longer a gold crown, an orb and a sceptre of power. Christ the servant king reaches out to us in loving service by washing our feet. The new symbols are the **towel and the bowl**.

On their way to a wedding in Outram on the Taieri plains, two car loads of nurses witnessed a terrible accident. A car was in a ditch and one was left upside down. Pulling over although not dressed for it, they secured the site, triaged the injured, stopped the bleeding and immobilised the broken bones and backs. The helicopters arrived to take away the injured. Then late and covered in blood the nurses got to the wedding. But several strangers owe their lives to those nurses who bothered to stop. Our daughter explained later to the Otago Daily Times reporter that they just did what they were trained to do. Wouldn't that be a great answer when we are asked why did you feed the hungry or welcome the stranger. "I was just doing what I was trained to do."

And Jesus concluded: "When you do it for the least of these, you do it for me!"