

Compassionate Service the New Measure

26 November 2023

Christ the King Sunday

Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

I spent a night as a king. The young people of Timaru organized a medieval feast. They approached me and asked if I would be their king.

“What do I have to do?” I asked. “Well, you get to wear a crown and boss people around and you get the first helping of food and a beautiful queen.” “Sounds good,” I said, “sign me up.”

Anyway, strangely it ended up a very humbling experience. Getting first dibs on the food was good, but the bossing people around, not so much. After a while it wears pretty thin. As for the beautiful queen, all I can say is they should have gone to Specsavers.

Today goes by the name of Christ the King Sunday.

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

Just as I had a weird experience being a king for a day, 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 is 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 compassion.

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

In other words, to find happiness, to find fulfillment, to find purpose in our lives, indeed, to find Jesus, we need to be helping others.

In August of 1964 Jean Vanier, a naval officer and professor of philosophy, founded a community dedicated to helping those with mental disabilities. He called the community L'Arche which means The Ark in English. The idea was that people in the community find a safe family environment, safe from the dangers of the outside world. Those who lived with men and women in the community were not professionals, just ordinary everyday people who were moved to share their lives with others.

To their great surprise those people discovered that they ended up receiving as much and more from those they were helping as they were giving to them.

Jean Vanier puts it like this: *Our people are poor. By themselves they can't cope, they need friendship, they need community. But those that are poor call forth that which is most beautiful in other people, our desire, our capacity to give life. And when we give our lives to the poor, we discover they are giving life to us.*

It's not big heroic things these people do but in small ways their generosity of spirit enriches others' lives as they in turn enrich them.

Jean concludes *I think we are all called to do little things, but little things with love.*

I don't know about you but when I hear the Gospel talking about helping the naked, the poor, the sick and imprisoned my heart drops for I think what can I do? But when I hear Jean Vanier's words to simply offer my life with a generous spirit to those God puts in front of me my heart begins to sing.

Two men, both seriously ill, occupied the same hospital room. One man was allowed to sit up in his bed for an hour each day to help drain the fluid from his lungs. His bed was next to the room's only window, the other man had to spend all his time flat on his back.

The men talked for hours on end. They spoke of their wives and families, their homes, and their jobs, even where they went on holiday.

Every afternoon the man in the bed by the window would sit up and pass the time by describing to his roommate all the things he could see outside the window. The man soon began to live for that one hour every day when his world would be broadened and enlivened by all the activity and colour of the world outside. The window overlooked a park with a lovely lake, ducks swam, and children sailed toy boats. Young lovers walked arm in

arm amidst flowers of every colour of the rainbow. Grand old trees graced the landscape, and a fine view of the city skyline could be seen in the distance. As the man described all this the other would close his eyes and imagine the scene in every detail.

Days and weeks passed.

One morning the nurse arrived to find the lifeless body of the man by the window. He had died peacefully in his sleep.

As soon as it seemed appropriate the other man asked to switch his bed beside the window. Slowly and painfully, he propped himself up on one elbow to take his first look at the world outside. Finally, he would have the joy of seeing it for himself. He strained to slowly turn. The window faced a wall. The man asked the nurse what must have compelled his deceased roommate to describe such wonderful things outside the window. The nurse responded that he was blind and couldn't even see the wall. "Perhaps he just wanted to encourage you," she offered.

In such a way as this we discover, not only meaning and purpose for our lives, but Christ himself.