

Christ the King

We are often asked the question, “Whose side are you on? Who do you support?” The questions are often asked in the context of a sporting event. During the AFL season most of us align ourselves with one team or another. At other times of the year the choices are often made for us by where we live in Australia or in the world. But when it comes to political or moral leadership taking sides is not so easy. In many places in our world today people are risking their lives to protest against the political leadership of their countries. Those protests often take on a dangerous life of their own.

The choice for who we want to be our leader is an important choice. In our first reading today, we see that God had made known that he was on the side of David. He had already chosen him to be king of Israel. The people pleaded with David to accept that decision and then anointed him as their king to make that choice clear.

Jesus was of David’s kingly line, but he did not speak about himself as a king. He came into Jerusalem for the last time riding on a donkey. He came in as king, but he did not claim any power or authority over people except what they were willing to give to him. People had to choose him to be their king just as people chose David.

In our gospel today we see that many refused to choose Jesus as their king. Luke makes the point that people were declaring whose side they were on. The religious leaders jeered at him, “He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Christ of God.” The soldiers joined in the abuse. But the general crowd did not. The choice for or against Jesus is acted out by those who were crucified with him. One of them taunted, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us as well.” But the other criminal was able to recognise Jesus as a king. In an amazing way he was able to see this man hanging there beside him, without any sign of the power and authority that belonged to him as king, as the one that he could put his hope and trust in. You and I can ask for that kind of faith. It is a faith that allows us to see beyond what we can see with our eyes to search for where God might be hiding.

The criminal hanging beside Jesus was open to a very profound change of heart, a change that needs happen for all of us if we are to acknowledge Jesus as our king. He admitted of his own sinfulness. “You got the same sentence as he did, but in our case, we deserved it: we are paying for what we did wrong.” It is hard to imagine what crime could merit such a horrible punishment as hanging on a cross. But he also makes clear the innocence of Jesus. “But this man has done nothing wrong.”

And then he humbly asks Jesus to remember him when he takes up his kingship. He doesn't ask for any favours, any positions of power, just to be remembered. But the idea of "remembering" in scripture is something rather profound. To remember someone is to be present to that person and make that person present to us. When Jesus told his disciples to do what he had done at the last supper in memory of him, he was telling them that he would be truly present to them each time they spoke those sacred words over the bread and wine. He was telling them that they would be present to him, caught up in the very mystery of his dying and rising again.

The response that Jesus makes to the criminal beside him is one of compassion and love. It confirms what is central to our understanding of salvation. To be saved is to be in union with Jesus, to be in communion with God. Jesus was confirming that he would remember him. He would be present with him as he took possession of his kingdom. "Today you will be with me in paradise." The salvation that he was promising the criminal stands in sharp contrast with what those who were mocking Jesus were asking him to do. To be saved for them was to come down from the cross. To be saved for the criminal was to be with Jesus as he gave away his life in love on the cross.

The invitation that we are being given today is to take on the mind of the criminal who was hanging on the right of Jesus. We are invited to accept Jesus as our king as he did. We are invited to declare whose side we are on. If we can do that then we too will be invited to be with Jesus. We are invited to be with the Lord in all that we do, in all that we are. We are invited to model our lives upon him and upon the way that he lived his life in love for others.

Today we are invited to honour Jesus as our king by renewing our baptismal commitment when we were joined with him in an everlasting union. May the Lord strengthen that union today and help us to live it to the full.