

Christ the King

How are we going during this time of lockdown? Have we missed having people around us? Have we been thinking a bit more about how much we need others? Have we been missing some of the people that we ourselves reach out to?

In this gospel chosen for the Feast of Christ the king we continue to read from chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel. Jesus is honoured as the Universal King who comes to take up his kingdom at the end of time. How we are judged worthy to be part of that kingdom is described for us. We see that people are judged to be part of the kingdom not because of their rejection or acceptance of the Jesus who was made known to them, but because of their rejection or acceptance of the Jesus who was hidden from them. They were judged upon how they treated the Jesus who was only present to them in "the little ones" who were the disciples of Jesus.

In our story today both groups of people ask the same questions. "When did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome; naked and clothe you; sick or in prison and go to see you?" They were not judged because they did not recognise Jesus, but because they cared for him or failed to care for him.

We could be saying that if the people who do not know Jesus are going to be judged by the way that they cared or did not care about others, then how much more will we be judged upon our care of others. We have been given faith enough to know that Jesus is present in those around us. We have been given faith enough to know that the love that we are called to share with each other is God's gift to us. We who know Jesus have been given the model for our loving in the way that Jesus himself poured out his life in love for others.

One of the problems we may have with this gospel may be that we think we do not know anyone around us who is hungry or thirsty, naked or in prison. We live in a society where almost all the people around us are well fed, have more clothes than they can possibly wear, drink to excess and seldom go to prison. I think the gospel invites us to look further out and further in. We are invited to look beyond the comfort that may surround us to find ways to support those in need in our wider world. As I was taking the bus into the city on Wednesday, I couldn't help thinking that this is a good way to notice some of those who are struggling whom I usually do not see. In our local community the St. Vincent de Paul Society helps us to notice a feed and clothe those that we may never have any contact with.

But I think today's gospel also invites us to look a little deeper to notice the hungry and thirsty, the naked sick and imprisoned who are around us. People hunger and thirst for many things: food, shelter, respect, a job, peace, happiness. People hunger for a word of forgiveness or encouragement. There are many needs and many ways that we can respond to those needs. Sometimes it can be as simple as taking time to say hello, or offering a smile of encouragement, or a word of forgiveness or thanks.

How do we respond to Jesus when he says that he was a stranger and you welcomed me? Hospitality is a wonderful virtue that allows God to be especially present in our world. But hospitality does not begin by inviting others to share a meal. It begins with an attitude that makes room for anything or anyone who is different. Hospitality welcomes difference and finds ways to value and learn from those who are different from us.

I was naked, and you clothed me. To be naked is not just to be without clothes. It is to be without self esteem or without love or peace of mind. We are able to clothe others with affirmation, with encouragement, with good reputation and speaking the truth.

Maybe today we can look a little deeper to see that people are sick in many different ways and they need us

to be there for them. Maybe we can notice those around us who have become prisoners not because of the crimes they have committed but because of the misfortune that has come their way.

Our reading from the Prophet Ezekiel suggests that Jesus should be thought of as a shepherd king who reaches out to us in whatever way we need him. "As a shepherd keeps all of his flock in view, I keep my sheep in view. I shall rescue them from wherever they have been scattered during the mist and darkness. I shall look for the lost one, bring back the stray, bandage the wounded and make the weak strong" And if we think that we don't need the Lord to rescue us at the moment we hear him say, "I shall watch over the fat and healthy. I shall be a true shepherd to them."

As disciples of the shepherd king, we are called to be like him in the way that we care for others. Perhaps we should be thinking that we will be judged not so much upon the way that we cared for others, but upon the way that we were open to allowing Jesus to care for others through us. Jesus wants to do so much through each one of us.