

SERVING GOD'S KINGDOM?

For the members of the Church of Ireland Men's Society, the Church of the Holy Evangelists, Carnmoney. The Kingship of Christ, Sunday 26th November 2017

Matthew 25: 31-46

The Kingship of Christ is a festival lately invented. After a war that had removed most of the kings of Europe, Pope Pius XI wanted to rally Catholics against the tide of secularism. 'Christ the King' was the symbol of his campaign, launched by an encyclical, *Quas Primas*, in 1925. Paul VI moved the celebration to today, the last Sunday of the Church's year.

That Christ is King is not a major theme in Christian tradition. Yes, we sing George Herbert's 'King of Glory, King of Peace'. The Catholic tradition gives us 'Hail Redeemer, King divine'. George Bell wrote the wonderful 'Christ is the King, O friends, rejoice!' Rather, the great title for Jesus' sovereignty is 'the Lord'; the one seated at God's right hand. For, in the Old Testament, 'the Lord' is the paraphrase for the Tetragrammeton, the Name revealed to Moses that no Jew dare pronounce, the Name above every Name. Jesus, the Lord, exercises God's sovereignty. Jesus shares in God what it is to be God.

If Jesus, the Christ, is King, it is as Israel's Messiah, the Anointed of God. And, as Messiah, he is a figure of suffering. It was as a pretender that he was handed over to Pilate. It was as King that Pilate examined him. It was as King that the soldiers abused him, that he was crucified, and was mocked as he died. Religious Israel cannot acknowledge him, but he died as the representative of a people exiled, dispersed and despised. They have made a disproportionate contribution to human civilization, but have, in history, been repeatedly driven out, dispossessed and murdered. Within twenty years of the declaration of Christ the King, they were subjected to genocide.

This is the Man who live and died, not for his own reign but for the kingdom of God. This he proclaimed as an imminent reality. God's kingdom was in him, in his context with evil, his deliverance from the demonic. It was evident in his healing. He taught it in his teaching – the law of love. He conveyed it in parables. Above all, it was manifest in his compassion, his welcome for the outcast and excluded, the lost, the last and the least. For this kingdom he was crucified. It is this kingdom that his resurrection declares a universal and eternal reality, of which he is Lord and King. To this kingdom we say we belong.

So, the test of our loyalty is, do we recognize Him? Do we, Gentile Christians, recognize Israel's crucified Messiah as our King? Do we recognize him in his suffering people – hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick and in prison. In the parable on his lips, these are his Christian brothers and sisters, Jews among Gentiles, doubly excluded, suffering for him and as members of their race. But his reign is universal. In him, God has begun a new humanity. So now, those who are his must include all with whom he has identified in his death – dying hungry, malnourished and thirsty; refugees and asylum-seekers; all the dispossessed of this earth;

those dying from polluted water and treatable disease; those imprisoned by this world's endemic injustices as much as by its tyrants. Is there a voice among these that would speak for us at his judgment? Are there among them voices that would give evidence against us?

Christ's Kingdom, as God's Kingdom, claims our loyalty above any other – political, communal, personal or social. This has always been its challenge. In this, its citizens – Christians – come up against the authorities of this world. So where is the evidence of our citizenship, of our loyalty to God's King? Or do we do things differently, forming within our other loyalties a church of our common identity, with organizations of mutual interest? This happens easily when a Christian community is a minority, conscious of its difference from others. A minority should be what Jesus said his disciples should be, salt or yeast, minority ingredients that bring taste and life to the whole. But a community pre-occupied with its own existence and annual programme – from the Church's year to the annual dinner – will have little to show for the Kingdom of God.

Jesus manifests the compassion which *is* the heart of God. He reigns only in the suffering of un-bounded, un-conditional love. So his Kingdom will be manifest in churches, communities and organizations which display something of his love; who are there for others; whose focus is outside themselves. So 'Fields of Life' works for clean water, education and community development in Africa. The Mothers Union has also done great work there, and can also be quietly effective at home. The Society of Friends, a tiny minority, gave great service throughout our 'Troubles' at Quaker Cottage and Maghaberry. In Rome, the Sant' Egidio Community works both with the city's poor and in international peace-making. In Dublin, the organization 'Trust' serves homeless people beyond the reach of the statutory agencies. Organizations like these serve those with whom Jesus has identified, in life and in death. So do others. But these, through their service, make manifest the Kingdom of God.

To serve Christ in his Kingdom is not a call to mere activism. It is a call – to us and to his Church – to conversion, to recognize Christ in those with whom he has identified, and to serve them. So we shall serve him in them. He will be present in the work. Then the life will come.

Gregory Dunstan
26th November 2017

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