

## Christ the King sermon - Year C

Luke 23. 33-43

Today is the last Sunday of the Church year. Next Sunday we enter the season of Advent, the time of waiting and preparing for the coming of the Christ as a baby. So for some, it may seem strange to be confronted with this death story when very soon our thoughts and readings will be turning to a birth.

Christ the King feast is a recent addition to the Catholic calendar. Introduced by Pope Pius XI in 1925, it was to mark the "sixteenth centenary of the Council of Nicaea" held in AD 325 which defended the full divinity of Christ and therefore his royal claims of sovereignty over humanity. It is also viewed in part, as a response to the political turmoil in Europe after the First World War and the rise of various -ism's, nationalism, secularism, fascism and communism.

Many had lost faith in the church and God. The political establishment was viewed as inept and self-serving. People were looking for alternative, likeminded communities in which to express their fear, their anger and create acceptable scapegoats for perceived or real injustices, "we are in this situation because....." Sound familiar? Reign of Christ Sunday was to remind people that regardless of who or what they aligned themselves with on earth, ultimately there was only one loyalty, one ruler worthy of their devotion who could actually offer the security they craved.

Today our world is battling it's own -ism's: such as tribalism. Behaviours and attitudes that stem from strong loyalty to one's own social group. We all belong to tribes of one sort or other. And to varying degrees we allow our views to be shaped so they align with the beliefs of those we most strongly identify or feel secure with.

The more threatened we feel, the more we will fight for the advancement and success of our own tribe. Even to the extent of ignoring evidence and substantiated facts that contradict perceived threats to our tribe. It's no wonder that the Oxford dictionary's new

word for 2016 is “post-truth”: denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.

We see this sort of tribalism in the disenfranchised, white, working class of America who voted for Donald Trump, scapegoating the other for personal misfortune, obtaining security in the promises of a perceived strong leader who advocated discrimination and even violence to attain the desired goals, keep us safe. We see this sort of tribalism in the Americans who voted against Trump - and also many around the world, who correctly or incorrectly perceive themselves to be morally, intellectually and culturally superior, scoffing Trump and his supporters.

We see this sort of tribalism at work 2000 years ago in the events leading up to today's gospel reading. The religious elite who (no pun intended) trumped up charges against Jesus because he was a perceived threat to the security of their earthly kingdom. The Roman overlords who mocked Jesus, and his Jewish accusers with the sign : “This is the King of the Jews” - as he hung seemingly helpless and powerless, the very antithesis of a king. A victim of all their allegiances, prejudices and fears which had been shaped by their various religious, cultural and political tribes.

And all this leads us to this stark, desperate scene, three men hanging on three crosses. And one in fear, pain and anger derides Jesus - “save us”, he cries, but doesn't believe it is possible, not for a minute. He sees a humiliated weak man who inconceivably forgives his enemies, not a strong saviour. Till the last, this criminal cannot move beyond blind hatred and mockery.

Then the other criminal. Surprisingly, in the most dire circumstances he is able to look beyond himself to another, to reality, the reality that Jesus is innocent. This criminal is able to discern goodness and truth, and defend it even while his world is imploding in pain and fear. He is able to recognise a cosmic reality “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”.

If there was ever a Holy Spirit moment, this is it. A moment infused with such God given grace, clarity, faith, and probably hope at the most desperate of times. This criminal

recognises the most powerful person in this whole scenario is the one viewed as the weakest.

And Jesus responds to his revelation: "Today you will be with me in Paradise". Today this man will move not simply from life to death, but to another kingdom. His discernment of Jesus' true identity as King of an eternal realm with the ability to forgive, save and bring eternal life moves him into the Kingdom of God.

Surprisingly, there are similarities between this death scene and the upcoming birth narrative? A cow shed, a crucifixion site, are unlikely places to find a king. They reveal a king who defies prevailing expectations of kingship. Living a simple ordinary life. Allowing himself to be vulnerable to others and for others, using his power to benefit others. Preaching justice and peace. Who will forgive, love and die for those who mock, deny and eventually kill him. And yet remains the one true king, ultimately and eternally having all power and authority. This is what Christ the King Sunday reminds us of. The one who is truly worthy of our loyalty and allegiance.

In light of recent events, I suspect our world will continue to divide into tribes, each defined by its own particular values and insecurities. My hope, and you may wish to make this your hope also, is to not give way to mockery, prejudice or fear. To remain able to recognise and defend goodness and truth. Never to lose sight of who deserves my ultimate loyalty, and to hold onto and live out his kingdom values. And always looking towards Jesus, whisper this prayer of hope, " Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom".

The Lord be with you.