

Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe (A)  
(Ezekiel 34:11-12.15-17 / Matthew 25:31-46)  
23.11.2014

Two biblical images are evoked by the Scripture texts chosen to mark today's feast in which the Church invites us to think of and celebrate *Our Lord Jesus Christ, Universal King*.

The first image resorted to in our Old Testament text to present Christ the King is the image of shepherd: a very specific type of shepherd, it should be said.

The whole emphasis is on a particular aspect of shepherding when it comes to likening the Lord to the shepherd. Unlike the normal shepherd who fattens his sheep in order to slaughter them and make gain for himself from their sale. the good shepherd only cares for and tends to the flock, watching over it, in a safeguarding role.

Clearly, the true shepherd of God's People is a good, kind, considerate, caring pastor. This shepherd is one who thinks not of his own interest, what profit his flock will obtain for him, but rather how he can be given for his flock and watch out for his sheep.

The second image to describe Christ the King is found in the gospel passage.

The image we find here is that of a mendicant, a needy, afflicted person. It is made clear to us that Christ the King is to be encountered in each and every person encountered along life's way who enters into one of the categories mentioned here.

In Matthew 25, the great Last Judgment scene, we are given to understand that the determining moment which will reveal whether or not we have served Christ the true king will be our attitude in regard to the downtrodden, the poor, the needy and the afflicted in all the various forms of poverty, need and affliction that are to be found around us.

If there is a call here for us to be attentive to others who fall into the various categories evoked in Matthew 25, I would dare to say, by extension, there is also an invitation for us to be ready to be merciful in our own regard in all those areas of our lives where we recognise ourselves to be poor, needy and afflicted men and women.

Having named the two images of Christ the King with which we are presented today, let us now examine each one of them just a little more closely.

First, let us look at the shepherd image.

This image is one we find in various places in both the Old and New Testaments.

We find it not least in chapter 10 of John's gospel where we see very clearly that it is applicable to Christ. In this chapter of John's gospel we hear Jesus apply the shepherd image to Himself when He says: *I am the good shepherd*.

In the overall teaching of John 10, Jesus unpacks the implications of this statement as He describes the qualities of the Good Shepherd.

*The shepherd knows each of his sheep by name and they know him and respond only to him.*

The point made here is that Jesus knows each one of the flock, He knows each one of us,. He knows us through and through. He knows our personality; He is aware of our needs; He is attentive to our feelings; He is conscious of our desires. He also knows our shortcomings, our failures, our struggles and our sins.

In all that we are (and are not) Christ knows us.

In the Bible to say that He knows is to say that He loves us. A line from the writings of the poet Sansom reminds us that Christ sees us not only as we today, but He also sees us as we are able to become. Yes, Christ sees better than we can see for ourselves what we can become.

Christ accepts us as we stand before Him, where and as we are today, while holding in His heart hope that we will come into that better place in which we are called to hold ourselves before Him.

We read in John 10 how *the good shepherd calls his own sheep out and leads them in the way they should follow*.

Jesus whom we confess as Lord and King of our lives calls us out and leads us in the way that is best for us, but never ignoring or overriding our liberty, of course. It has to be emphasised that freedom is left to us to respond to God's call in our lives or not. This point is made over and over again as we read our way through the Scriptures. We must *choose* the way in which we walk; it won't be imposed upon us.

If we are to experience freedom from those areas of pain which are part of our lives, if we are to move beyond those snares of entrapment into which we so easily fall and where our lives can get stuck, we need to hear and pay heed to the bidding of the Good Shepherd whose gentle voice guides us through the dark valleys of the night and/or the treacherous paths encountered in the light of day. Let me give some examples of where our lives can get stuck. Our advance in the way we are called to walk can be hindered because of the hold memories of past hurts have upon us, or again because of the paralysis caused by our present anxieties (often due to difficulties in or at least malaises around significant relationships in our lives), or again because of the fears of the unknown harboured in our hearts in regard to the future

Christ the King, who is our Good Shepherd, leads us in a way that goes against normal shepherd practice. He does not look after His flock to exploit it for his benefit. Instead, Christ the King *gives His life for His sheep*, He *lays down His life for the flock*, for us and for all people. I emphasise the word all, since today we celebrate the Universal King!

Christ the Good Shepherd dies for and nourishes His sheep.  
Think about this.

Here the shepherd identifies himself with the lamb being led to the slaughter-house. Normally it is the sheep that is slaughtered and its flesh which is given and received (indeed taken) as food. Jesus' way of doing things turns them upside down yet once again!

If the way in which the shepherd image is used in the Bible leads us to look at things in a radically different way and see them from a completely different perspective and angle (and it does!), then the second image used for Christ the Universal King (the image or images employed in today's gospel passage) oblige us to enter into an even more radical re-think about how we see God and how we relate to Him.

The Last Judgment scene of Matthew 25 sees the Lord identified with the poor, the needy, the powerless, the weak and humble.

How many of us think naturally of the poverty, neediness, powerlessness, weakness and humility of our God?

To some people such talk can be somewhat troubling. They will bolster their defence mechanisms by saying that it is actually heretical to think of God in any other terms than those which emphasise His grandeur in terms of might.

They more readily prefer to think of God as rich, self-sufficient, all-powerful, strong and almighty.

But, think of it, look at the testimony of the Sacred Scriptures and also what our life experience reveals to us.

Already in His creation God manifests a singular powerlessness. This is brought home to us time and time again when we see the force of nature at work. People ask, they cry out: *Where is God when disaster strikes? Why does God not just decide to rouse His mighty power and show forth the strength of His arm?*

When we say that God is all-powerful we must remember that there are limits God has placed upon Himself.

God has limited Himself to do only what love can do. There are things God cannot do because to do them would be to go against the grain when it comes to loving His creatures in a way which is respectful of their liberty.

Any of us who have striven and are striving to situate ourselves in regard to another person, other people, as God would have us do (that is in a loving and liberating way) will know the pain of powerlessness that goes with this. There is a helplessness in loving as God loves. To truly love places restrictions and limits upon us. We simply cannot force the other to do anything, even for their own good. We cannot and, however painful and even crucifying this may be for ourselves, we will not want to control or dominate our loved one/ones. While we might want to hold them back from doing something, following a course of action, making a life choice, or whatever else in a bid to protect them, we will find ourselves obliged on occasion to do as Christ told us we are called to do if we are to walk in His footsteps: that is to renounce ourselves!

(Parents will know what I am talking about here!)

There is a great cost involved in leaving the other, our loved one, entirely free.

Christ shows this to us.

Just think of what cost it involved for Him to leave those He loved and chose free, not only to leave Him alone in His passion, but even to be its cause.

Here too we will hear people question things. *But why did He choose Judas if he knew Judas would betray His love? Why did He choose Peter when He surely knew what a weak and sinful man Peter was?*

There is only one answer. Jesus chose to enter into and remain faithful to these relationships because He loved.

Love has its reasons which to purely human considerations are beyond comprehension.

This too we see played out before our eyes all the time.

Have we not heard or maybe said: *How can she stay with him given how he is, given how he has been unfaithful and failed her? Or, how can he still hang in there and not lose trust and hope in her given how fickle she has shown herself to be on occasion?*

Turn the question to ourselves. *How can, why do, others stay attached to us, given our limits and failings, our wrongdoings and the disappointments we cause them? How does God stay on our side given our multiple infidelities and sins?*

Because of love! Because of a love which, in purely human terms, is not reasonable, or rather goes beyond reason.

Love cannot be constrained. It is not contained by reason alone.

It is not that love is unreasonable or that it goes against reason, but that it goes beyond it!

I think of what Blaise Pascal states when he says: *The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing.*

The heart's reason is love.

And, let us never forget: *God is love.*

God's love is made manifest on the cross.

Here we see the king of love, Christ Jesus, lifted up, enthroned, showing mercy.

In the prayer corner of my room (my oratory space) I have an icon which depicts the crucifixion scene. Above the head of Jesus the words written on the scroll are not those of the gospel which relate Pilate's decree which stated *Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews*. Rather the words written upon the scroll above Jesus' head are that three word sentence from the writings of St John, already quoted, which says it all: *God is love.*

What Christ the King reveals to us is that *God is love.*

True love always makes itself humble and poor.

A true lover will always be more inclined to hold him or her self before the loved one in the stance of a poor and needy mendicant than that of some great and mighty benefactor.

Love always weakens us in a way. It makes us tender. It renders us vulnerable. Love leads us to be sensitive.

When we love we find that our unhealthy control mechanisms fall: both the tendency to want to control others and/or to be in an unhealthy self-control stance.

It is because Christ is the great lover that He is that He manifests Himself to us in the way He does: in those categories of poor and vulnerable people drawn to our attention in the Last Judgment scene. Christ can say: *I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I was naked, I was in prison, I was sick, I was poor and needy, I begged for your attention and love.*

Can we say those things of ourselves as readily?

Christ is there in those who place themselves before us in a humble stance today, pleading for our love, longing for our attention, waiting for us to be gracious to them. This is, of course, how the Lord always is with us.

When the Scriptures say *the Lord waits to be gracious to you*, it is important for us to remember that one of the privileged ways the Lord shows us grace is to await from us that we be gracious in His regard. This means that we be gracious to those who anxiously await a little sign of loving kindness and gentle compassion, from us, for Christ lives in them and He awaits of us that we encounter Him through them.

God is with us, He draws alongside us, He reaches out to us, longing for us to reach down to Him, in those who humble themselves before us and plead for our loving attention.

Such is the loving greatness of our God that He dares to abase Himself, to make himself lowly, poor and needy before us.

How are we going to stand before Christ the Universal King?

How are we going to be reckoned, judged and rewarded by Him?

The gospel could not be any clearer.

We relate to Christ, responding to the way He relates to us. Let us remember that most often the Lord relates to us in very unexpected ways.

Christ the King chooses to manifest Himself to us under the guise of the mendicant who begs for our loving attention; He shows Himself to us in those who look to us for our care, our consideration, our tenderness, our love.

We meet Christ the King by living loving lives.

We honour Him in service by caring for the needy.

The hymn writer who paraphrases the good Shepherd psalm gets it right when he reminds us: *The King of Love my Shepherd is whose goodness faileth never.*

Called to be like Christ, one with Him, by our baptism, in which we were all anointed prophet, priest and king, may we remember that our share in Christ's kingship comes about through our daring to love others humbly and be gracious to them in lowly service.