

CHRIST THE KING 2011: YEAR A

The 18th chapter of St John's gospel contains the famous dialogue between Jesus and Pontius Pilate about kingship: 'Are you the king of the Jews?', Pilate asks. And Jesus in turn responds with a question: do you say this of yourself, or did others say it to you about me? Later he says: my kingship is not of this world...and Pilate says: 'so you are a king then?' As so often happens in St John, there is a strange and enigmatic process of concealment and revelation, misunderstanding and partial recognition of the truth, questions left in the air. So you are a king then? What is truth? By contrast, the way in which we speak and sing about Jesus as a King tends to be more confident and clear-cut. 'Thou art the King of glory, O Christ' are words from the Te Deum, taken up in the proper preface for today...or think of the hymn: 'Rejoice, the Lord is King, your Lord and King adore...the keys of death and hell are to our Jesus given.' How does such a triumphant vision sit with Pilate's question: *are* you the King of the Jews? ...and with the context of his question, as he looks at the pathetic, bleeding figure crowned with thorns?

Yet we can't get away from it...not just that figure in front of a mystified Roman governor, but the whole business of wondering who this Jesus is, of being called to discern what sort of a king he is. In the passage for the epistle which we've heard this morning, from Ephesians, there was the prayer 'that the God of Our Lord Jesus Christ may give you a spirit of wisdom...having the eyes of your heart enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you...' And this enlightenment of the heart is to lead, it seems, to the recognition that Christ is seated far above all authority and power and dominion, above every name that is named, not only in this age, but in the age to come...'The eyes of the heart have to be enlightened, before we can recognise this king...and when we look at the story in today's gospel about the sheep and the goats, we discover a little more about this process of enlightenment and where it leads us. It's fascinating to focus on the question which both groups put to the king...'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink?' That's the question put by the righteous to the king...and by the other group: 'Lord when did we see thee hungry, thirsty, sick or in prison and not minister to you? *When* did we see you? *When* did we see the king? Righteous or unrighteous, in that story, they've seen someone in need; although the response of each group was different, the eventual surprise was the same for both groups; there, in the person of the suffering, sick and needy, was the king. 'The king shall say: you did, or did not, do it to me'. The eyes of the heart have to be enlightened before the king is seen. And here's another angle on it from the OT reading, another facet of this enlightenment of the eyes of the heart; behold, I myself will seek out my sheep: I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep: I will tend them and feed them in justice. This is the other side of the coin. The eye which has discerned Jesus the King in the suffering and the hungry and the prisoner has also to discern that the Lord God is not distant, unconcerned...but is himself at the heart of the tending and feeding of His people.

Here then are two startling truths for those who would keep God at distance...first, that He Himself will move *among* the suffering to tend and to feed them: the Lord is my shepherd: and second, that He Himself will be found *in* the suffering. Inasmuch as you did it unto one of the least of these, you did it to me. So it's not just Pilate and Jesus in St John; wherever we turn, we're faced with the mystery and enigma of Jesus and his kingship. How is the nature of Christ's kingship to be discerned...and how is this sort of kingship to be communicated in and to a world which thinks of kings and

queens either as autocratic and dominating figures in history books, not always very well-behaved: or today certainly as dutiful and much to be respected, yet really rather ineffectual except in some sort of symbolic way? It is a vital question for us who proclaim Christ to be not only our King, but the King of all creation. It is, I'm sure a great thing that we keep this festival of Christ the King, that we bow the knee before him, and offer him adoration and praise, like the great companies of angels and saints and elders in the Book of Revelation. But why? Only because he is such a *different* sort of king, a counter-cultural king, a king crowned with glory because he was crowned with thorns. Look at the Crown cut through by the Cross on this gospel book. This King is very God and very Man; very God, he is clothed like the shepherd who searches for the lost sheep...so in our time he is clothed like the street pastor, like the committed social worker, the nurse at the hospice, the relative who cares at home day after day, month after month. That's the king, the Shepherd king, whom we must proclaim. And very Man, he is clothed in the remnant robes of the street child in Calcutta, in the old blankets of some perhaps not far from home here in Worcester. This is the King, the real man, crowned with thorns. This strange and enigmatic King is He whom we adore today in worship, and must be the One to whom we bear witness outside these walls. This God with us, identified with the lost and the outcast, yet himself the loving pastor.

As we come to the altar once more today to receive broken, fragile bread and sacrificial blood outpoured, as we look up at the head crowned with thorns on the Cross, let us pray that the eyes of our heart may be enlightened once more. So that when we ask ourselves...and when a friend or stranger asks us...*is* Jesus a King then, we have the answer: yes, he is...and a very strange one; but one whose power and wealth are found in the love that seeks the lost, because it has been made one with the lost.