

Today marks the end of our church year and the climax of our belief in the transforming power of Jesus Christ. The baby born in a manger has lived, died, risen and ascended, and in today's gospel reading he is presented as the Son of Man, sitting on his throne in heavenly glory, who will come to judge the nations. Next Sunday the whole cycle begins again with the season of Advent, but for now we are celebrating the power and majesty of Christ and our faith that God is ultimately and triumphantly in charge. And we are accountable to him.

The word "king" does not appear in this narrative, even though the language of the passage is filled with power beyond that of kings and emperors. So what use is made of this title in our gospels? We hear it first when the wise men tell Herod they are searching for 'the King of the Jews'. Herod is terrified of a new rival but it becomes clear that Jesus has no such worldly ambitions. In his stories, we don't have triumphant kings glorious in battle; we are given examples of kings who make difficult decisions based on justice and kings who give banquets where everyone is invited. And then, at the end of his life, we see the same title 'King of the Jews' written on a tablet with a vicious, ironic intention, a tablet nailed on top of the cross where the child, now a grown man, is hanging between two thieves.

So we find ourselves worshipping both the King of the Universe and an executed criminal who spent his life among the outcasts and the despised. And that paradox sets the scene for this Son of Man's unique judging style.

First we note that all the nations are gathered before him. Not just Christians but Jews, Muslims, Hindus and people of all faiths and none. And they are separated into two groups not on the basis of their faith but their actions. This is embarrassing for good Protestants like us who follow the teaching of St Paul and believe

that we are saved through our faith not our actions. Indeed Jesus himself makes it clear in his teaching that we cannot earn our way into heaven. Yet he also sets out in some detail how we should live, most clearly in the Sermon on the Mount, and it now seems that everyone, not just his immediate circle, will be judged against that same ethical standard. As Christians we rightly believe in the ultimate truth of our faith, but we should not hold such a narrow view of that truth that it cannot admit the possibility that others may forge their own path towards it. And if that makes me a heretic, so be it.

Secondly it is striking that neither the sheep nor the goats were aware that their actions were a conscious response to Jesus. 'When did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or sick?' they all ask. The desire of the sheep to help those in need was instinctive, born of their deeply held values, rather than a taught and perhaps dutiful response. We're much more likely to lead lives of selfless service to others if we have a deep motivation, based on our gratitude for all God has done for us, than if we're trying to tick a few boxes because we know it will look good on our end of term report.

Finally and most arresting of all is the realisation through this story that our judge who sits on his heavenly throne is one and the same as the vagrant at our door, the neighbour with mental health issues, the annoying person in the room who no-one wants to talk to, the refugee washed up on the beach near Dover.

This is hard. The hungry, the poor and the sick don't always look, or talk, or smell as we might like. And caring for them takes time, energy and money. But if we truly want to worship Christ the King who reigns in heaven then we need to recognise that the best way to meet him in this life is by reaching out to the least, the lost and the lonely.

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