

**What sort of king is he? (Matt 25: 31-46)**

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Tonight we are celebrating the Feast of Christ the King. It seems important to ask what sort of king we are celebrating. I suspect this image needs some unpacking for a contemporary audience who might understandably think the time for kings has passed. What value does this image have for us today?

Perhaps it is also more important to keep asking the questions rather than thinking we have pinned Jesus or Christ down in our theology. According to Benjamin Myers, Rowan Williams keeps the question open by his overall vision of Jesus Christ 'as an intimate stranger, crucified and rising up into the broken world of human experience' (*Christ the Stranger*, 2012, p.x). And the first hymn reminded us that 'The suffering, dying Jesus is the Christ upon the throne'. Surely this feast is no invitation to mindless triumphalism.

Tonight's reading provides a rather ambiguous answer to the question of what sort of king he is. On the one hand, there is the sublime integrity and simplicity of Jesus' words: 'For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you gave me clothing; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me ... Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me'.

Here Jesus says he comes to us disguised as those in need. What is not said, but implied, is that he also comes in those who minister to those in need. Now his own mission on earth is drawing to its conclusion, he needs to pass the baton to his followers. Clearly, incarnation does not stop with Jesus' earthly life.

Mother Teresa is a well-known example of someone who was inspired by this passage. In her work among the poor and the dying in Kolkata she has been reported as saying that she was holding Jesus in her arms when she was holding a destitute and dying person. (Interestingly, her posthumously published diaries show that she did not always enjoy consolation, but carried on her work through long periods of darkness and desolation. No easy triumphalism here.) Mother Teresa also understood that there are more ways than one of being poor, hungry, thirsty and imprisoned in our contemporary world. She said: 'Being unwanted, unloved, uncared for, forgotten by everybody, I think that is a much greater hunger, a much greater poverty than the person who has nothing to eat.'

Jesus makes it clear that our mission is to minister to those who are literally or metaphorically poor, hungry, naked, sick or imprisoned.

But *how* and *why* we do this is of crucial importance. Many writers on spirituality encourage us to recognize these hungry, thirsty, naked and unfree spaces inside ourselves. Otherwise we are doing unto others what we need to do unto ourselves – and that is often unhelpful to both parties. It is not that we minister to others out of some self-righteous 'do-goodery' - like the Pharisee in Luke 18: 10 who prayed thus with himself: 'I thank you that I am not as others are, extortioners, unjust, adulterous, and even as this tax collector'. We are never more than wounded healers - the wounded, the broken, ministering to the wounded and broken, and being ministered to in return. Don't we say at the Eucharist: 'Broken bread for broken people'?

I can remember interviewing a woman whose first job after graduating with a Masters in Clinical Psychology, was at a maximum-security prison. Many of her clientele were murderers and rapists. I asked her, 'On looking back on that time, how did you feel about your clients?' She said: 'After getting over my initial fear and horror in hearing their stories, I came to love many of them. I realised that if I had been in their situation I might have been

capable of doing what they had done.'

But the king who comes in the guise of the vulnerable and powerless is not the only king in the parable. There are some aspects of tonight's gospel that are perplexing and even downright disturbing. The idea of Jesus returning as an avenging monarch and judge who relegates the 'unrighteous' (the goats in this parable) to 'the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels' – with or without the 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' – does not sit easily with the Jesus who teaches and walks the path of compassion, non-violence and forgiveness.

Quite apart from anything else, appealing to our fear of judgment or hope of reward, or the prospect that our enemies will finally get what they deserve, is hardly the most mature or altruistic motivation for ethical behaviour or showing compassion. Yet many religions use the idea of judgment and an afterlife as a means of social control, and the unscrupulous use it to manipulate followers into acts of terrorism, as we are well aware.

Returning to the Feast of Christ the King, which was inaugurated in 1925 by Pope Pius XI to counter secularism - I began by saying we needed to ask what sort of king he is. And now I might add, how are we to combat secularism in his name? As Ilio Delio, an American theologian, writes:

The Christian response to secularity is not to escape or reject this world... Rather the secular is the realm of Incarnation... We must see the world in its divine depth (*The Unbearable Wholeness of Being: God, Evolution, and the Power of love, p. 102*)

As contemplatives we counter secularism by seeking to uncover, and by paying attention to, the divine in the ordinary reality of daily life. As we sit with people in spiritual direction the question hovering in the room - spoken or unspoken - is: Where is God in this person's story? Where might the

stranger be knocking at the door? After all, as Richard Rohr reminds us, God comes disguised as our life.

These are also the questions Etty Hillesum struggled with as a young Jewish woman in a Nazi concentration camp. Her 'answers' - the 'theology' that emerges from her letters and diaries - is an eclectic mix of different sources: psychology, literature, philosophy, Judaism and Christianity, but above all her own experience of God. Central to her theology is her belief that everyone is made in the image of God, although that image can be soiled or distorted – a belief that was sorely tested in the camp. She writes:

I love people so terribly because in every human being I love something of you [O God]. And I seek you everywhere in them and often do find something of you.

She speaks of a deep well inside each person where God dwells. But so often the inner well is blocked with stones and grit and God is buried, and 'has to be dug out again'. She writes:

I shall try to help You, God, to stop my strength emptying away, though I cannot vouch for it in advance. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves. And that is all that we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves. And perhaps, in others as well. Alas there doesn't seem to be much you yourself can do about our circumstances – about our lives. Neither do I hold you responsible. You cannot help us but we must help you and defend your dwelling place inside us to the last. (Klaas Smelik (ed) *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941-43*, 2002)

I find these words incredibly endearing and inspiring. She does not see God as an almighty deliverer who has forsaken them, or console herself with the

promise of future reward, or punishment for her Nazi oppressors. Instead she has this notion of needing to help God in the here and now reality of life in the camp by 'digging him out'.

Her last postcard thrown from the train carrying them to Auschwitz said: 'We left the camp singing.' What an inspiring legacy!

I can't finish without acknowledging the note of judgment in the parable. I want to do this through the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer from a letter from his Nazi prison dated July 16 1944:

Rather than relegating us to the eternal fire, God joins us in the fiery furnace of this life. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 1972, p.360)

That is not to say we are not accountable. How might it be if we made a regular practice of asking God: 'Where did I (or not, as the case may be) recognize you in the people I met today, the events that happened, or the world around me?'

The following poem seems to be a response to such questions – and more than that:

### **Apology to God**

I'm sorry for treating you as disembodied;  
I forget that I am one of your embodiments.  
I'm sorry for regarding you as indestructible.  
Today I destroyed you  
in a person I ignored.  
Forgive me for treating you as unborn,  
when you are constantly being born.  
Excuse these very words.

I forget you are beyond words.

And excuse me for thinking these thoughts.

I forget that *I Am* is not a thought.

(James Charlton: *Non–Dualism in Eckhart, Julian of Norwich and Traherne: A Theopoetic Reflection*, 2013, p. 118. With the permission of the author.)