

Christ the King, 20th November 2022

OT: Jer 23:1-6

Epistle: Col 1:11-20

Gospel: Luke 23:33-43

The readings for today point us towards an understanding of the feast we have gathered to celebrate. The prophet Jeremiah refers to a man who would, as we heard, “reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

At the very heart of today’s feast – the feast of Christ the King – is the teaching of S Paul in his letter to the church at Ephesus. In Eph 2:19 and 20 he says, “... you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”

It just so happens that this is one of my favourite passages from Scripture, although I usually quote it from St Peter, as we find it in 1 Peter 2:11. As I have reflected, over a long time, on this description of us here on earth who follow Jesus I have, as time has gone by, learned more about what it means. When S Paul says we are no longer strangers and aliens he is referring to the status we have here on earth. In the Greek in which the letter was written, the important words – the ones we translate as strangers and aliens - are ξενοι και παροικοι. Let us look at these words for a few moments. Firstly ξενοι (xenoi) – strangers. This is the root word from which we get the word xenophobia in English. S Paul describes us while we live here on earth as ξενοι – strangers. S Paul goes on to use the word παροικοι (paroikoi), which can be translated as aliens, or sojourners. It is significant that the word παροικοι is the root from which we get the word parishioner as well as the word pariah!

As those who follow Jesus we are called to take our focus away from life here on earth, and place it on where we really belong as a result of our Baptism. We are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. As such we should expect to be treated here on earth as those who are the subject of xenophobia and as pariahs. Now many of us may not have experienced either of these things but we do not have to go far to find, even here in Palmerston North, people who have been the object of xenophobia.

As those who are citizens of Heaven, we owe our allegiance to Jesus – to Christ our King. In Scripture we find that Christ is not just our King, but is also the prince of peace! He came to usher in the time of the peace of God. As we look at our world we find so much that is not peaceful: we are living in a time which is far from peaceful. It has been said that the world is teetering on the brink of World War III.

The feast of Christ the King was instituted at a time when the world seemed to be sliding towards the violence of war. Some of us might remember reading or hearing that the British Foreign Secretary in 1914, Sir Edward Grey, stood at a window in the Foreign Office, watching the gas street lamps being lit as dusk approached on 3 August. He is famously said to have remarked to the editor of the Westminster Gazette, "The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our time." The first World War, called the war to end all wars, had drawn to a close in 1918, but there were ominous signs that all was not right with the world. Into that situation Pope Pius XI warned, in 1925, that "as long as individuals and states refused to submit to the rule of our Saviour there would be no really hopeful prospect of a lasting peace among nations." These ominous words can be found in Quas Primas, the encyclical in which the Pope instituted the Feast of Christ the King.

However, given what happened in the ensuing decades of the 20th Century, and the first twenty-two years of this new century and millennium, we might wonder whether the Pope's optimism was misplaced.

World War II was far more devastating than the war that was meant to end all wars, and as for a return to the faith of vast numbers of people in the world, it seems that the very opposite has occurred. We could well be justified in asking whether the institution of the Feast of Christ the King has been a failure. According to worldly standards, the answer would surely be yes. But according to the standard of faith, the institution of this feast we celebrate today cannot possibly have been a failure, for in faith, we understand Christ's kingship in the light of the cross.

In Christ's darkest hours, when he was abandoned by his followers and underwent the cruellest of deaths, he revealed his eternal kingship to the world. At the time, Christ's followers thought his crucifixion was a total disaster, but after his resurrection, they could recognize it for what it was – the manifestation of Christ's glory.

As dark as the 20th Century was, and as fraught with violence and war as the last twenty-two years have been, the Feast of Christ the King reminds us to look beyond this darkness and to recognize the truth of Christ. It reminds us that we truly are strangers and aliens here on earth. It encourages us to have our eyes fixed on heaven. It holds before us the new covenant God has offered us in Jesus.

As we keep this feast, how do we know all these things? The answer is a simple one; it is in what we are doing at this very moment. It is in our worship.

As we join in common prayer; as we have our senses touched by sight and sound, smell and taste, we have our eyes lifted towards heaven, the place of which we are citizens. In a document known as the Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy we are told that “In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims.”

It is appropriate that we have this foretaste of heaven on this last Sunday in the liturgical year. Next Sunday is Advent Sunday and our focus moves to preparing for the celebration of Christmas. We look forward to remembering the birth of the Christ Child and longing for the coming of Christ at the End Time to reign over all creation.

Today we take a few steps along that pilgrim journey that leads us to our home.

May the God who raised Jesus from the dead bless you as you live here as a stranger and an alien.