

## Sunday Next Before Advent

**'Let all be received, like Christ, for He is going to say: 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me'** *The Rule of Saint Benedict ch531*

Today is the Last Sunday in the Church Year. It is known as Christ the King Sunday and would usually be celebrated in church with uplifting hymns and anthems being sung out with great gusto; as our minds are transported to the transcendent wonder, and glorious majesty of our risen Lord, Judge and King of the Universe. The one who will one day return to reign in the hearts of all his children for eternity. It's one of those Sundays you can be pretty sure you will leave church slightly more upbeat than when you went in!

However here we are on this Christ the King Sunday, in another lockdown, and prohibited from gathering together to worship as a faith family once again.

In so many ways the last church year 2019-2020 has been a very challenging year for us all hasn't it? The church building was closed then partially open, then closed again.

We have been sheltering in, many petrified of catching covid. There have been unexpected funerals, weddings and baptisms have been postponed or cancelled, others have been struggling to work from home whilst looking after and teaching children, others have been worried about shortages of medicines, and even food.

Today many continue to wonder if Christmas will be cancelled or when we able to physically see loved ones again. Loneliness is rife and depression has become a common side effect of the pandemic.

In 1992 Her Majesty the Queen referred to that year as an "*annus horribilis*", to be honest this year has to have surpassed those times (as difficult as they were) in so many devastating ways.

So, when I realised that I should be writing about celebrating this today, I admit I was challenged by the idea and really had to dig deep in my heart to even begin to reconcile the idea of Christ the all-powerful King of love ruling over creation when there is so much chaos and suffering all around us.

Where on earth is the king of love in all of this?

As I thought on that question, Ann's reflection on Thessalonians last week popped into my mind. Her words reminded me that the life of faith has for most Christians always included periods uncertainty and then times of understanding and hopeful expectation.

Pondering mysteries like this, questioning where he is. Even feeling confused, upset and angry at God during times like this is not new. And in fact opens us up to be able to (as both individuals and as a community) understand God in new and deeper ways.

Ann pointed out that Paul's advice to help the Christians of Thessalonica through their situation was to teach them to encourage one another and to build each other up as a community in love. It was good advice then and remains our vocation to each other as a community of faith today. But the story doesn't end there..

In many ways today's gospel reading (Matthew 25:31-46) develops that idea further, it goes beyond the church learning to support itself, and leads us to a place where we recognise that God inhabits each and every one of us; those who already worship in church, who have an active relationship with Christ, and those who have yet to take that step on their journey too.

*"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."*

These words that fall from Jesus' own lips in today's gospel, reveal not only our calling to love one another without measure because we all have divine worth sharing the same father. But also because the breath and loving presence of God is at work and living within us all too.

What this means is that by loving each other we are in fact loving the Lord, and the Lord is loving the world in all its times of heart ache and struggle, back through us.

That's where Jesus is in these difficult and challenging times..

He is in the scientific mind searching for vaccines, the sacrificial hands of the NHS worker, the chaplain's silent tears sitting at the bedside of the dying, he is in the wave of your neighbour and the face that will look back at you the next time you look into a mirror.

That's where the king of the universe is, and that's how his kingdom reigns, through us reaching out in the power of his love.

So this morning as we come before our Kings throne of grace let us all pray to be inspired to care for one another without counting the cost. And at the same time be encouraged by Gods promise, that no matter how dark these times might feel, we can have hope because God is love, God is here, and love my brothers and sisters, has and will always conquer all! Amen.

**FrM**

### ***Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi***

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.*

*Where there is hatred, let me sow love;*

*where there is injury, pardon;*

*where there is doubt, faith;*

*where there is despair, hope;*

*where there is darkness, light;*

*where there is sadness, joy.*

*O Master, grant that I may not seek to be consoled, as to console;*

*to be understood, as to understand;*

*to be loved, as to love with all my soul.*

*For it is in giving that we receive;*

*it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;*

*and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.*