

HOMILY SUNDAY 34 - YEAR A (Homily 02)

“God Hidden in the Poor – Christ the King”

(Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17; Psalm 23; 1 Cor 15:20-26, 28; Matthew 25:31-46)

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There is a certain irony in this feast of Christ the King. During his life on earth, Jesus shunned anything that approached royalty. He lived the life of a simple itinerant preacher. When his early ministry drew thousands of followers who wanted to make him king, he fled to the desert.

Born a little child and dying between two criminals on a cross, the last thing that Jesus sought was to be seen as a king. Yet on the cross, written in the three main languages of Judea at that time (Latin, Greek and Aramaic), was a sign that read, “The King of the Jews.” And finally, the Church instituted this feast so that we also would worship Jesus as King, as our King, as King over all of creation.

This contrast between the way Jesus seemed to view royalty, and the need that the modern world still seems to have for royalty that can impress us with its grandeur and pomp, calls us to look at this title of King more closely, using a particular lens, the lens of the poor, to assess both the notion of royalty, and the notion of authority.

The readings give us some food for thought about these themes, and about the end of time, judgment and the meaning of life. Then this homily will focus on the writings of a modern day prophet who still lives among us to explore the deeper meaning of this feast.

In the first reading, the prophet Ezekiel tells us that God himself will seek out and shepherd his sheep. God will judge their thoughts and actions, and will punish the selfish, proud and uncaring sheep.

St. Paul, in the second reading to the Corinthians, also deals with the end of time. He assures us that through his resurrection and return in glory, Jesus will destroy all sin and negativity, including death itself. Interestingly, he also will destroy all other forms of authority, a curious mention that needs a closer look.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells us unequivocally that the only criteria by which God will judge us is charity, and not prayer or devotions or status or education. Put simply, Jesus is now hidden in the poor and we will be judged by how we treat the poor.

This Gospel leads us right into a study of the writings of Jean Vanier, son of the former governor general of Canada, and founder of the L'Arche movement of homes to care for the mentally challenged by providing a family atmosphere for them as opposed to cold harsh institutions.

This life-long dedication to the poor and the mentally challenged has taught Vanier priceless lessons about God, Jesus, life, ministry, authority and the poor that can help us garner the deeper meaning of this feast of Christ the King.

In his recent book entitled *The Scandal of Service*, Vanier shares very insightful thoughts on authority and Christian service. He writes “In this domain of the heart, all people are alike. There is no visible hierarchy one could signify by dress. People are all alike, and they have the same dignity. Each one’s life and history are sacred. Each person is unique and important. The only hierarchy that remains is one of love, and that remains hidden. So at the end of our lives we will be judged by how we have loved, and not by our clothes, or the masks society has imposed on us.”

How strikingly similar to the gospel are his words. In the end, we will be judged only by charity and how we have treated the poor.

Vanier goes on to say this about Jesus instituting the Eucharist and then washing the feet of his disciples: “These two symbolic acts around the body, his own body and the body of each one of his disciples, are gestures of communion and love. In both of them Jesus is not teaching or giving something to his disciples; he is giving himself. Jesus does not want to dominate or control them. On the contrary, he makes himself little and humble. He lets himself be eaten by them in the Eucharist and he takes the place of a slave or of a child in the foot-washing. In so doing, he reveals to us a God hidden in littleness.”

That is just another way of saying what Jesus says at the end of this gospel passage, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me,”

Vanier adds to the theme of shepherding in the first reading and authority in the second reading these words: “By washing his disciples’ feet, Jesus is calling them not just to be good shepherds, but to exercise authority at the heart of community in a totally new way, a way that is humanly incomprehensible and impossible. Can this authority from below, where, out of love, we place ourselves lower than

others, still be called authority? It is like the authority a child has over a mother; or a friend over a friend; or a wife over her husband and vice versa. They listen to one another, at each other's service."

Vanier then takes us even deeper into the mystery of who Jesus is, and what Jesus is calling us to in these readings, when he writes, "By removing his outer garments, Jesus is revealing his true glory, his deepest self, his heart's most intimate desire. He becomes smaller and smaller, more and more vulnerable, in order to communicate love. We are drawn to love someone who seems little and who needs us. That is where the mystery of Jesus lies: he becomes small and humble in order to live with the disciples the same union and communion he lives with His Father. Jesus is reminding us that from now on he is hidden in the poor, that if we want to find him and to meet him, we must come closer to the poor."

What is our response to these challenging words? Can we integrate them into our own lives, so that we can follow Jesus more closely? That will always remain a challenge, as it was for the early disciples, represented especially by Peter. Here is what Vanier has to say about Peter's response:

"Peter never imagined a Messiah like Jesus. Because of his own limits and weaknesses, Peter needed a strong leader, a rock, someone he could admire. Jesus' disciples today, just as in the past, have trouble understanding God who becomes poor and humble, hidden in the weak and the poor, and in people with handicaps. God's all powerfulness is hidden in order to show that it is a power of love and in order to awaken the powers of love in each one of us, if we are open and humble and trusting."

Vanier's reflections are like a beam of light providing deeper understanding of Jesus' words and actions, and calling us to deepen our love for God and express that love through loving service of the poor.

The beautiful psalm 23 adds the finishing touch to these readings, reminding us that the Lord himself is our shepherd, and gently describing the ways that God will shepherd us in Jesus, and calling us to shepherd one another, and especially the poor, in a similar way. Then we need never worry about being judged, for we have already judged ourselves by our loving response to the Word of God.

The Eucharist we celebrate now is an experience of Jesus continuing to shepherd us. Through the penitential rite, we celebrate his forgiveness and compassion. Through the Liturgy of the Word, we hear his voice and let it touch our hearts. And

finally, by receiving his Body and Blood, we are taken up into intimate communion with him, as he was in intimate communion with his loving Father.

We are then sent out, to find him in the most needy and most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters and to serve him by trying to fulfil their needs to the best of our ability. May God bless us all in this effort.