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The Feast of Christ the King [C] – Sermon preached in St Mary's Witney.

Jeremiah 23.1-6
Ps 46
Colossians 1.11-20
Luke 23.33-43

May it be given me...

It's absolutely wonderful to be back here in Witney for the Feast of Christ the King – the fourth or fifth time by my reckoning and therefore, without doubt, by now a Holy Tradition. One slight disadvantage of preaching habitually on any given Feast is that it's quite difficult to come to the lectern with something new but a potential idea came to me after a Brother recounted a joke at Community Recreation one Sunday evening. The joke went thus:

A man died and went to heaven full of years and more than ready to meet his eternal reward. After a few days exploring the infinite expanse of the heavenly plane he happened upon a very long and very high brick wall in which were set identical black doors. Stopping at the first the soul scented the whiff of incense and heard the end of the Tridentine Mass. A short pause followed and then the increasingly strident tones of a Priest in full sail inveighing against something or other. Moving on to the second there was no whiff of incense but there was, instead, the unmistakable sound of a Southern Baptist Pastor fulminating about something. By this time the soul was more than a little intrigued so he went to listen at the

third door and caught the end of what he knew to be an unaccompanied Gaelic metrical Psalm but this was rapidly replaced by a lone and rather fierce Highland voice castigating the assembly for some perceived shortcoming. Walking away from the third door the soul espied another heavenly being walking in the opposite direction so he stopped her and said “what are all these doors for? I thought that there wouldn’t be any divisions in heaven; I thought that heaven was a place where everything was made right and everyone reconciled.” “You’re absolutely right” said the other soul “but we built these enclosures for the benefit of the people inside them not for the people outside.” “Why’s that?” Says the soul. “Well” said

his new found friend “we thought it might come as too much of a shock for them to realise that they’re not the only ones here...”

We may find ourselves amused by the tale but, on reflecting on it, we must acknowledge that the reality it comments upon is deeply sad and unfortunate; it is simply heartbreaking that there are some people within the body of Christ who seem to derive some sort of perverse satisfaction from imagining their Brothers and Sisters not quite ‘making the grade’ and thus finding themselves in Eternal Perdition rather than the Kingdom of Christ, a satisfaction which is, to my mind at least, not only obtuse but also blasphemous. Because of this

tendency – albeit a minority tendency – and because we are celebrating the Kingdom of Christ in this Feast today I want simply to ask this question: “The Kingdom: who’s out and who’s in?”

Having stated that I find the tendency of some of our fellow Christians to imagine their Brothers and Sisters in Eternal Torment extremely distasteful it may seem strange that I then go on to suggest that there is a possibility that some souls may not, in the end, be present in the Eternal Kingdom but the reason for suggesting this is that logic demands that God must give us the capacity to reject Him; to reject His love and to reject His invitation to the Kingdom of Christ: if He didn’t

then we would have no choice in the matter; we would have to accept God and a love which is compelled or demanded is, surely, not really love at all? It says a great deal about the depth of God’s Love for His Creation that He is prepared to countenance let alone accept rejection but that is, I believe, the case. But let’s pause this train of thought for a moment; do we honestly think that, in the end, any soul, encountering Our Lord and Saviour; perceiving, perhaps for the first time, the depth of his love would ever reject him? Do we think that any person on being confronted with the Divine Compassion of Christ would ever choose to reject it? I can’t, of course, say for certain but it strikes me that the answer to that question

is almost certainly ‘no’ and therefore even if God gives people the capacity to reject Him I find it hard to believe that, in the end, anyone ever would; I certainly hope and pray that that is the case.

So having said that I can’t quite believe that any Soul will not be in the Kingdom of Heaven (not because they are innately good but because God is innately good and innately merciful) it seems that we’re also heading towards an answer to the second question: that being who’s in? But again, let’s pause and think: the majority of us will have no difficulty in imagining that our nearest and dearest and those who have shone brightly with the light of Christ in this world will have attained Eternal Peace in

the Kingdom of Christ but what about those people who seem to us to be as far from God as it is possible to be? What about people who have, for example, done something really terrible; something which has affected not only them but also the vulnerable and defenceless? Surely it is counterintuitive to think that they might have a place in the Kingdom of Christ, a Kingdom characterised by its Justice, mercy and peace?

The answer to that question comes to us in the Gospel reading which we’ve just heard from the Gospel of St Luke. In his *Divine Comedy* the Italian poet Dante christened St Luke ‘*Scriba Mansuetudinis Christi*,’

or the ‘describer of the gentleness and meekness of Jesus’ it is a lovely title for the gentle Physician who recounts so many encounters in his Gospel which speak of Jesus’ desire to restore lost wholeness and heal all things. In the Gospel passage we’ve just heard, Jesus is being Crucified and the unimaginable physical torment he is feeling is exacerbated by the taunting of the onlookers beneath his cross. Abandoned by those who claimed to love him, the Lord hangs on the cross; an object of mockery and reviling. On either side of him there are two criminals – the translation we heard uses the word ‘Thieves’ but the Greek word which St Luke uses is much much stronger than this and is more accurately rendered (as it is in some

older translations) as ‘malefactors’ literally those who work evil or badness. These are not just ‘ordinary’ criminals; these are men who have committed extremely serious crimes; they are, to use a modern expression ‘the lowest of the low’ and they are being subjected to the most brutal and humiliating punishment available to the Roman authorities; in itself indicative of the gravity of their transgression. One of the criminals taunts Jesus along with the other onlookers but the other – known in Holy Tradition as St Dismas – confesses his sinfulness and asks Jesus to have mercy on him before asking that Jesus would remember him in the Kingdom to come. In so doing Dismas – or whatever the name of the Criminal was

– was asking Jesus to reassure him that he would have a place in the Kingdom; that Jesus would re-member him; that Jesus the King would make him present in his Kingdom despite his past transgressions and failings. To that request Jesus simply says “*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise...*” Observe: Jesus doesn’t ask Dismas to tell him what crime he (Dismas) has committed; Jesus doesn’t seem to be in the least interested in the gory details. Jesus doesn’t ask Dismas to perform any tests or even to make restitution for his crimes. Dismas’ request is enough; his newly found love of Christ is enough even in the final moments of his life; his sins have been washed away by his Saviour’s love and

thus he is ready, when he dies, to take his place in the Kingdom, hardened, brutal man that he was. Perhaps the compassion he received from Christ the King is the first taste of human love and gentleness he has ever encountered? To the outside world this might seem extremely puzzling; it might even seem as though we Christians are saying that God doesn’t really care about Sin and its consequences but that is a completely wrong inference. Of course God cares about Sin; of course He cares about its consequences and the suffering felt by those who are victims of the sinfulness and greed of others but if God’s distaste for Sin is strong His bountiful and forgiving love is manifestly stronger and thus we see

this wonderful exchange between Jesus – God made man and the image of the invisible God – and Dismas.

So, to repeat my question: who has a place in the Kingdom and who doesn't? To that I simply say that I cannot really believe that, at the last, anyone will reject their invitation to the Kingdom; an invitation won at great cost to the Saviour. In addition St Luke reminds us most movingly in the exchange between Our Lord and St Dismas that there are no crimes; no offences; no actions which can not be forgiven by the God whose capacity for love and compassion continue to defy our human understanding. We celebrate today the Feast of the Kingdom of Christ; a Kingdom to which we may say all are

invited and from which none are barred no matter what they may have done. Let us pray that, in the end, all people will come to accept their invitation to the Kingdom; that they will come to accept Jesus Christ as their Saviour and their King and that all of Creation and all people will find the place already prepared for them by the King of Love we honour today. Amen.