

Feast of Christ the King Year A

In today's Gospel Matthew gives us an apocalyptic vision of the last judgement when all the nations – without distinction between Jew and Gentile, without discrimination between priest and people – are assembled before the king. It would be a pity to limit the value of the passage to the last judgement scene, because what it offers is a picture of the kind of community where Jesus sees himself to be recognized, the kind of community where Jesus sees himself to be at home.

The presence of Jesus is hidden among the poor and the vulnerable. Where their needs are recognized, Jesus is acknowledged. When the hungry are fed, when those who thirst are offered drink, when strangers are offered hospitality, when the naked are covered in dignity, when the sick are seen to, when prisoners are visited, Jesus himself is touched by mercy. Their vulnerability is his vulnerability; he is present where human need is greatest.

According to this vision, if an alien came from outer space and asked us where our Jesus lived, we might have to take him to strange sanctuaries: refugee camps and migrant detention centers, back alleys, hospitals and prisons, and tell him that Jesus is to be found somewhere in these places. And tell him, too, that the blessed of God are to be found there, feeding, welcoming, clothing, visiting, paying attention.

In Matthew's vision we have a list of human needs and appropriate responses by a caring community. None of the needs is specifically religious; they are human needs as wide as the human heart. To those ordinary human needs there is the response of the kingdom. That response is an authentically human one and, therefore, a profoundly religious one; it is honoured by the title "blessed of my Father".

The blessed are praised for the simplest actions – and they are all actions not attitudes – to those who experience simple human needs. There are no records of great heroism, no stories of conquest, no great trials or sufferings, no marvelous triumphs over disaster, no feats of imaginative daring. The requirements are simple and don't go beyond the capacity of any human being. There is no training required, no academic qualifications necessary. The actions are the simple response of those who pay attention to what

happens in the world of the familiar and who move to answer the needs which confront them.

For Jesus, what happens in the world of the familiar has an eternity of importance about it. Little acts of kindness have eternal significance. Human graciousness and charity are ground enough for welcome into the fullness of the kingdom.

Those who are blessed are not conscious of having done any special service to Jesus: “When did we see you...?” they ask. They have responded with mercy to those in need, without any great thought beyond that response. In the mission discourse in chapter 10 of Matthew’s Gospel Jesus declared that any kind of service done to his apostles would be rewarded as done to him, and indeed to God: “Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.... Whoever gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you he shall not lose his reward.” In today’s Gospel that thought is extended to embrace “one of the least of these brothers of mine.”

The thought now is that Jesus looks upon every kindness done to a person in need, however lowly, as a kindness done to himself. Those who are cursed bring the doom upon themselves because they failed to respond to simple human needs. They are not accused of violent crimes, or offences on a grand scale – any more than the blessed were praised for heroic virtue. Rather, they are accused because they failed to act on the human need they saw before them.

The shared problem of the blessed and the cursed is: “When did we see you?” That may be our question too, for all we see is the legion of those in need. But the Gospel asks us to *interpret* what we see. The Gospel challenges us to see the broken body of Christ in the brokenness and the woundedness of those we see around us. Christ still suffers in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned. To pay attention to them is to pay attention to the broken body of Christ. And to do that is to be welcomed as blessed of God, because it is to live as a community of mercy.