

DIOCESE OF NOTTINGHAM

Homily of the Bishop of Nottingham at the Mass of Thanksgiving for the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy in St Barnabas' Cathedral Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe Sunday 20th November 2016

Today's solemn Feast of Christ the King is the grand finale to our liturgical year and also, most fittingly, to the Jubilee Year of Mercy that we have been celebrating. Over the past year we have been reading from Luke's Gospel, with its emphasis on the mercy, compassion and forgiveness of Jesus, in his ministry and encounters with people.

In Luke's moving account of Jesus' Crucifixion, our Gospel reading this evening, this emphasis now reaches its climax. Only Luke tells us of the two criminals crucified alongside Jesus, King of the Jews. For Luke it is fitting that Jesus should end up on a cross between the very kind of people he had particularly sought out in his ministry: the sinners, the poor, the broken, the wounded and the marginalised, to bring them the Good News that he had been sent by his Father to do. We see in this Gospel reading that, just as Jesus had repeatedly taught his disciples not to respond to violence with more violence - but to be forgiving, so Jesus forgives the very men who had unjustly condemned him to death, and those who drive nails into his body. When one of the crucified criminals joins in with the chorus of jeers and abuse that accompanies Jesus to his death on the cross, the other criminal acknowledges his sin and asks Jesus for mercy, 'remember me when you come into your Kingdom'. It is a striking example of all that Jesus stood for that, in the midst of his own suffering, he still has a heart open to others, and that he promises that man, not only mercy and forgiveness but a place at his side in paradise, that very day.

So too in Matthew's Gospel, it is significant that one of the last things that Jesus says to his disciples, before he is betrayed and handed over to be put to death on a cross, is to tell them that he will come again, as King, to judge all the peoples of the earth. You will recall that we are told there that Christ the King will divide human beings into two groups: the sheep and the goats. The sheep will be placed on his right hand and the goats on his left hand. The sheep will be made up of those who, in imitation of Jesus in his life and on the cross, have

tried to live their lives in a generous, selfless, kind and caring way; they are the ones who will enjoy a life of joy and happiness with Jesus forever in his kingdom of heaven. OK, so how do we go about trying to be among the sheep, rather than the goats?

The good news is that Jesus tells us in some detail how we must live our daily lives: 'for I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me; sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me.' If, in our care and concern for other people, we do these kinds of things, then we will be placed among the sheep on judgment day. You will all recognise these ways of living our lives as the Corporal works of mercy which Pope Francis has been highlighting and encouraging us to respond to throughout this Year of Mercy. The Pope has reminded us that, from the moment of our baptism, we are not only subjects of the crucified and Risen King, Christ Jesus, but we are also called to share in his Kingship, to cooperate with him in helping to make the Kingdom of God more visible in our world. How? Through our living out of the Corporal works of mercy.

Sometimes, in response to the challenge of that Gospel passage from Matthew, people ask: 'Is Jesus saying here, that we have to earn our ticket to heaven by doing these good deeds? That Gospel passage seems to say clearly, NO, because when we examine it more closely we see that those on the sheep side didn't think like that, didn't think that, in doing these acts of love and mercy, they were somehow earning their passage to heaven. In fact, you will remember that they are very surprised when Jesus says to them, come take your place in my Kingdom, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome, etc. So, they say to Jesus, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you drink; when did we see you a stranger and make you welcome, naked and clothe you, sick or in prison and go to see you?' They are genuinely surprised and had no idea that their carrying out of these good deeds would mean that they would live forever with Jesus in his Kingdom. So when they did these good deeds in their daily lives, they weren't trying to earn God's favour or avoid God judging them badly; they weren't trying to earn brownie points for themselves with God. But rather, they carried out these good deeds because their hearts saw people in need, and they responded as best they could to them, out of love for Jesus who, throughout his life and on the Cross, teaches us to care for and to put others before ourselves. They were just putting their faith and love for Christ into action, in the way they tried to live their daily lives. The sheep are people

trying to keep the eyes of their heart open to see and respond to the needs of others; rather than selfishly, and with blinkered vision, looking out only for their own needs; and this is exactly what Jesus is asking of us.

Because living out the Corporal works of mercy just to try and get ourselves to heaven wouldn't be real love, would it? It would be thinking first of ourselves, it would be selfishness. Instead, living out the Corporal and the Spiritual works of mercy is a way of living that, because of our love for Jesus, is driven by authentic love and concern for others. It's about seeing the face of Jesus, who loves us so much, on the faces of all those around us, and wanting to love him back in and through our acts of love and compassion, mercy and forgiveness. It's about having 'a heart which sees'; which notices other people and their needs, and tries to respond with love and mercy.

Tonight then, in celebrating the Kingship of Christ Jesus in our lives, we have been reminded that the kingdom of God is not so much a place, as a people responding generously and openly to the selfless love, compassion and mercy of their King, shown in his ministry and in his actions on the cross. So, although the Jubilee Year of Mercy draws to an end in Mass this evening, and we give great thanks to God for all the graces and blessings received in the course of this Year, let us each pledge tonight that we will continue to do our best to respond to the challenges of the corporal (& spiritual) works of mercy in the way we live our lives and relate to others.

Earlier this afternoon I invited young adults, from across the diocese, to join me in the Cathedral Hall to hear about the experiences of two young adults who travelled to the World Youth Days in Krakow, to discuss how best they feel the diocese could support them in the living out of their faith, and to share with them some national and diocesan events that they might be interested in. Some good things emerged from our discussion so, if you were not able to be present then, and you are aged between 16 – 35 and you would like to be kept informed of what is being planned, please fill out at the end of Mass one of the forms which young stewards will be holding at the back of the Cathedral.

Rt Rev Patrick McKinney
Bishop of Nottingham