

Homily for the Solemnity of Christ the King – Year A

By Fr Russell Pollitt SJ

In the early Church they believed that you could only confess your sins once, so some people would wait until near death to make a confession and to be d. The Roman emperor waited a long time, despite what the Da Vinci Code tells you about him, and when he thought death was imminent, he was baptised, round the year 337 AD. And this was a watershed moment in the Christian Church because in the year 313 AD Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of state, of the Roman State. He did this to try and unify the empire, as trade and law and taxation and Roman culture had already begun to do. And by doing this, Constantine gave a mixed blessing to Christianity. On the positive side, he brought an end to the persecution of early Christians. Many of the Emperors had wondered what type of love would see so many followers of a man willing to give up their lives for their belief. It also meant the Church played a significant role in shaping and moulding the values of society, especially Western society. Christianity seemed to moderate and cultivate and humanise some of the worst excesses of the Roman Empire. But there was a negative side as well. The Church becomes very powerful, very quickly. Bishops begin to wear purple, and dress as the Roman Emperors do of the Roman Senate. We know, even today, we see in the way that bishops dress some of that from this era. Churches took on the shape of Roman Basilicas. The government of the Church mirrored that of the Empire. The liturgy imported all sorts of practices that were performed in Roman Temples. And sadly, conversion to Christianity was demanded by the sword. There was no room for religious pluralism in this regime. And up until the time of Constantine, the most, perhaps, well-known image of Jesus was the Good Shepherd. After Constantine, it's not surprising the Christ the King becomes the most popular image. Mary, then, is also presented as a Queen. And these are important facts to take note of. Because it shows how in a particular era, in a specific time and place, our faith is practiced and impacted on by the social, the political, and the economic context in which it was lived. And so despite the shenanigans that shaped this Feast of Christ the King, which is always celebrated on the last Sunday of the Church's Liturgical Year, we are presented with a stark contrast: the image of a King. The one perhaps that we so often esteem to, of success, of power, of status, or control, or popularity, or riches, vs. the image of the Kingdom of Jesus, one that is spoken about very clearly in the scripture we hear today.

Ezekiel, the image of a king as the shepherd who in darkness seeks and rescues his sheep by bringing back the strays, by binding the injured, by strengthening the weak, and making sure that justice is done.

Or Matthew's Gospel, the one who feeds the hungry, quenches the thirst of those who long for something to drink, who welcomes strangers, clothes the naked, and cares for the sick and for prisoners.

The real authentic sign of Christ the King is revealed in our loving and not in dutiful response to others. The real danger that Christ the King ironically points out is that we suffer from a blindness that renders us incapable of seeing the poor, of seeing the poverty that exists in all its forms around us, spiritually, emotionally, physically, socially, and economically.

Christ the King, this feast that we celebrate today reminds us that so often we are blinded and not able to see our interconnectedness. And that connectedness is between our lives of faith and those living in squalor in townships in this country. All the undercurrents of xenophobia which always seem to be flowing in our society, or our unwillingness to welcome those who are part of the LGBTI community, or those who we cast aside because they have HIV, or the harsh judgement we in our own Christian community make on those who are remarried. You see all of these are the very symbols and expression of what it means to live in the Kingdom of Christ. To belong to the Kingdom of Christ.

Our positions, the positions that we take, indicate more powerfully than our words, or our profession of faith who and what Kingdom we are aligned with.

I want to suggest to you today that this celebration of Christ the King invites us to consider three things. First is transformation. You see God's love is a powerful force, and we must allow the momentum of that force to transform us. And when we do that others experience our transformation through our willingness to be open to them.

We are not transformed unless others experience through us God's love, the love of the eternal King whose throne is the cross and whose kingdom welcomes before anyone else, the little ones, the Gospel speaks of, is the only love that can transform. And we're invited into that love, to be changed by it, transformed by it, so that we in turn can transform the attitudes of our own time.

The second thing that I want to suggest is that this feast of Christ the King invites us to consider how well we are living alternatively. You see, Christ the king invites us to the values of his kingdom. And when we do this we will be surrounded by or inserted amongst the stray, the marginalised, the poor, the little ones. The alternative living of the Gospel compels us to be horrified at things like the thieving of PPE funds from the poor in this country; to be horrified at gender-based violence. The very people who get the seats of honour in Christ the King's kingdom are the ones that we often are willing to dispose of, the ones who often are those on the margins. Do we choose to insert ourselves among them?

And finally the third invitation is to take stock. As our local and global church, we have come to the end of yet another Liturgical Year. And today's Solemnity of Christ the King perhaps asks us to take stock by asking simply one question of ourselves: how have I shown love in the past difficult year? It leads us to prepare for the season of Advent when we see the fullness of God's love revealed in the incarnation, but how have I showed love in the year that has past?

On this last Sunday of the year, the image of Christ the King begs us to give our allegiance to what really matters, to the kingdom where there is no place for ambition or greed or status or power. Christ the King challenges us to be revolutionaries by making the world a more just and peaceful place.

So the feast of Christ the King is not about the powerful church born with Constantine. Christ the King is about our hearts being revolutionised. And so we might ask ourselves today: are our hearts revolutionary enough to claim membership of His Kingdom, of the Kingdom of Christ the King?