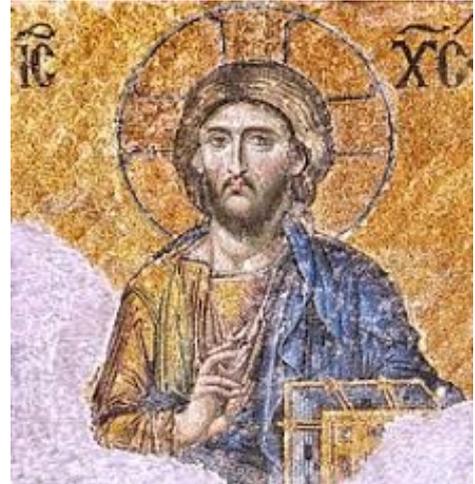


Solemnity of Christ the King

“When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then, all the nations will be arranged before him, and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep from goats, putting sheep to his right, goats to his left. Then the King will say to those on his right: ‘Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what’s coming to you in this kingdom...And here’s why: I was hungry and you fed me...I was homeless and you gave me a room...I was sick and you stopped to visit...’”

Matthew 25, 31-46



For over fifty years now, movie makers, fascinated with the end times, have produced an ongoing series of apocalyptic films. Some of us will remember movies like Armageddon, The Road, Apocalypse Now, and many more. Apocalyptic art and literature deal imaginatively with the end of the world, and put their focus on the dramatic, the spectacular and the frightening. Anyone who has visited the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican will know how that great 16th century artist, Michelangelo depicted the end of the world and the last judgement in graphically dramatic terms. The Bible, too, has its fair share of apocalyptic literature, and the readings of this last Sunday of the Church’s year give us a taste of the apocalyptic genre of writing.

In today’s first reading, Ezekiel offers a compassionate view of the end of the world, with God arriving as a good and caring shepherd reaching out in welcome to all of humanity gripped in fear. Referring to the Jewish religious leaders as shepherds who have neglected their sheep, Ezekiel presents God proclaiming: “Watch out! I’m coming down on the shepherds and taking my sheep back. They’re fired as shepherds of my sheep. No more shepherds who just feed themselves. I’ll rescue my sheep from their greed. They’re not going to feed off my sheep any longer! From now on, I myself am the shepherd” (Ezekiel 34, 10-11).

In the second reading from Corinthians, Paul echoes John’s theology that sees Jesus, in his death on the Cross, drawing the whole world into the life and love of God. In the end times, according to Paul (and John) we will all be gathered up into God.

The great Jesuit priest and palaeontologist, Teilhard de Chardin wrote in the same vein as Paul and John. In an essay he wrote in the 1930s, Teilhard commented: “Someday, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love, and then, for a second time in the history of the world, humankind will have discovered fire” (Teilhard de Chardin, “The Evolution of Chastity” p.86-87 1936, in *Toward the Future*). Teilhard believed that the whole of creation is gradually being drawn up into the energy of God. The end times will be when that drawing-up process reaches completion. There is none of the drama of apocalyptic writing here.

Matthew’s account of the end times and the last judgement carries the clear message that the choices we make in the process of living our lives will determine the shape of our end times. His writing resonates with the painting of Michelangelo’s Last Judgement, but with less drama and spectacularism. Still, it is apocalyptic in style, and not to be taken literally. It has been presented by Matthew in the style of all the parables recorded in the previous six chapters of his Gospel. The clear message of today’s gospel-reading is that our being taken up into God will be assessed on our history

of shepherding those who have been neglected or overlooked by their officially appointed shepherds.

How, then, is this gospel-reading appropriate for the celebration of Christ, the King? Historically, the solemnity of Christ the King was instituted by Pius XI between the two great world wars, at a time when national leaders were stressing their own importance, their insistence on their citizens showing loyalty, and their emphasis on the power invested in them. It was also a time when the Church's status and influence, particularly in Europe, was in decline. The Pope set out to stress that the only king worthy of our unswerving loyalty and total allegiance is Jesus Christ, the Messiah and God's anointed.

Paradoxically, during his life on earth, Jesus refused to have the title of king attributed to himself. He wanted nothing to do with power, pomp and circumstance. His leadership was manifested principally in service, especially service of the poor, the weak and the forgotten. While today's readings from Ezekiel and Matthew present the end of the world in terms of a time of judgement, the emphasis is not on a judgement of condemnation. Rather it is on the challenge to us to live faithful to the message of Jesus, faithful as members of the flock he shepherds, and faithful shepherds of those who are entrusted to our care.

The proof of our allegiance to Jesus Christ as the one on whom our lives are centred and the message he proclaimed and lived is spelled out in detail in today's gospel parable:

"Then the King will say to those on his right: 'Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what's prepared for you in God's kingdom. It has been ready and waiting for you since the world's foundation, and here's why:

*I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room, shivering and you gave me clothes,
sick and you stopped to visit, in prison and you came to me."*

It is crucial to our lives as disciples of Jesus that we recognise him present in all those whom we encounter, and reach out to them as he showed us. With each dawning day, we have to rediscover, reclaim or reignite the fire in our lives. How the world will end is of little or no importance. What is important is that we live and die with the fire of love and care in our hearts. In the meantime, we might care to reflect on Robert Frost's poem, Fire and Ice:

*Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favour fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.*