

34th Sunday (B)

24th November 2024

'Christ the King of Compassion'

Dan 7: Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven. Ps 92: *The Lord is king with majesty enrobed.* Apoc 1: *to Him be glory & power for ever.*

Jn 19: *'Yes, I am a king ... and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice.'*

On Friday, the House of Commons will debate the private member's Bill brought by MP Kim Leadbetter, a Bill to permit assisted suicide for the terminally ill. Many in positions of knowledge and authority — including the current Health Secretary, the deputy Prime Minister, the Justice Secretary, the Education Secretary, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and various senior members of the judiciary, as well as countless medics & others — have spoken out against the immorality, and/or injustice, and/or unworkability of allowing such a radical step to be taken, the deliberate killing of frail and vulnerable members of our society. Alongside all the clear theological and sociological reasons against allowing assisted suicide, I had a further thought, that it would be a nightmare for our King. I can't imagine that he, a practising and believing Christian — anointed at his coronation in Westminster

Abbey to uphold the Christian faith as the foundation of his reign — would have any easy conscience if he were asked by Parliament to sign into Law a Bill for the intentional killing of citizens of this his country. I pray that he will not have to face such an awful dilemma, and that MPs will step back from the brink.

Personally speaking, I'm thankful that I live in a monarchy. All those extra election campaigns in a republic for a President ... well, I can't imagine it! I'm grateful that we have a King, and he just gets on with things, diligently and dutifully. I'm not making him out to be a saint or anything, of course not, but nevertheless the traditional splendour with which we allow him to fulfil his role expresses both his dignity and the high regard in which he holds the workings of our country. I remember being particularly moved on the one and only occasion when I was in close proximity to the monarch: it was the day after the 7th July 2005 bombings on the London underground. The hospital in the East End at which I was full-time chaplain, the Royal London, had treated over 200 victims

of the bombings in a traumatic and yet heroic way, and the *very next day* the Queen came to visit the injured, the A&E unit, and to address the staff crammed into the hospital canteen. What a huge difference that visit made: it raised the morale of the hospital after its most horrendous day ever, treating all those bomb victims. Her Majesty spoke simply and kindly, and with real feeling. The depth of affection with which her visit was greeted by the hospital's hard-working staff was tangible, and provided me with a first-hand experience of the gift of the monarchy: someone who was in this role not for anything political she could get out of it; not for a season; not for financial gain and a leisurely retirement but simply because it was her duty & pleasure to unite & lead the British people.

Surely this is what we might respond to most warmly when it comes to our relationship with the monarch, that he/she can combine princely dignity with compassion, ceremony with concern. It's that without loss of dignity a good monarch should also have the common touch. The Church honours as *saints* a number of kings and queens

such as our own King Edward the Confessor; good King Wenceslaus of Bohemia; Queen Margaret of Scotland; Saint Louis IX of France; Holy Roman Emperor Henry II; St Jadwiga Queen of Poland; Karl I of Austria — monarchs who were loved by their people *because they served their people, often in person*. Not always easy, in fact, to combine political power with piety, especially in days gone by when monarchy meant *absolute* monarchy; power tends to corrupt, as they say. Remaining truly saintly in a position of power is a difficult though not impossible task.

Christ the Son of God is just such a king, of course. When we honour Him today with the title of *Universal King*, we are celebrating the power and majesty of a king who has come to us in genuine compassion. This solemnity of Christ the King, which brings the 'Ordinary Sundays of the Year' to their close, is quite a new feast. Pope Pius XI instituted this feast a century ago, in 1925, with an encyclical letter to the whole Church. At the time, secularism was on the rise, and many Christians, even Catholics, were doubting Christ's authority, as well as the

Church's, and even doubting Christ's existence. Pope Pius XI, and the rest of the Christian world, witnessed the rise of disturbing dictatorships in Europe, and saw Catholics being taken in by these earthly leaders. He hoped the institution of the feast would have various effects, such as:

- that nations would see that the Church has the right to freedom, and immunity from the state (*Quas Primas*, 32);
- that leaders and nations would see that they are bound to give respect to Christ (*QP* 31); and
- that the faithful would gain strength and courage from the celebration of the feast, as we are reminded that Christ must reign in our hearts, minds, wills, and bodies (*QP* 33).

So, this great feast reminds us of the absolute authority of Christ over all things: over the material universe, over all of human dominion and history, and over our lives. And yet, despite His absolute kingship, He exercises that authority in a way that only the loving God can, as a humble servant of the Father's will.

The first two readings of this Mass — from Daniel and from the Book of Revelation — are related to one another, and describe Him in His dignity as Son of the Father: *coming on the clouds of heaven, in the splendour and majesty of the heavenly worship of God*. Yet we know

Him as the very same one who came down to us in compassion as the *Son of Man*. He is worthy of all ceremony and praise, but without loss of true dignity He comes to show His divine care and concern for us — getting His hands dirty so to speak, washing His disciples' feet, laying His hands on the sick, embracing the lepers, humbling Himself to share fully in our humanity.

We learn so much about the kingship of Christ, don't we, as we listen to the dialogue between the Lord Jesus and Pontius Pilate. One is the divine King of Kings, and one is a rather brutal Roman procurator. The God of true power stands before Pilate who *assumes* power: Jesus who has relinquished any display of power places Himself at the mercy of Pilate who displays a power he doesn't really possess, and who will show his *weakness* when he hands over the innocent Jesus for crucifixion at the behest of the baying crowd and against his better judgment. Jesus stands up for *truth* rather than for power; but Pilate would live a lie rather than give up his pretend-power. When Jesus says, *I came into the world for this: to bear witness to the*

truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice, Pilate merely replies, *What is truth?* The truth of course is that Jesus's reign will last for ever, while Pilate's term as a petty procurator of a Roman outpost will last maybe another 6 years.

When we think about what makes us be drawn to respect a person in leadership, be it a king or queen, a president or prime minister, it's principally, isn't it, the measure to which that person has given his or her life in service of the truth: to benefit humanity, to engage with the people, and not to live apart, aloof, or simply enjoying the trappings of power. All of humanity can learn the very epitome of leadership and government from the Lord Jesus. Submitting Himself to Pilate and indeed to the entire burden of human sins, was not an act of weakness, but an act of supreme love.

Jesus as King of all Creation, all History and of Heaven, is worthy of our deepest and most heartfelt affection. We are touched if the monarch comes into our little lives somehow; the fact is that our ultimate King, the

Lord Jesus, is willing to set foot into our little lives every day! Without any compromise to His dignity as God, yet He enters in whenever we turn to Him in prayer; and comes really to dwell in our hearts when we come to Mass and Holy Communion. We can never overestimate the deep joy that His holy glory brings by our simply being in His presence: our Lord and God and King ...

As we come to the end of another Church year — as we weigh up our lives against the demands of Christ — let's be drawn in admiration of our divine king, Jesus the Lord. Whatever the past year has been like for us, He has our care and protection in His majestic heart. He is not a dim and distant God, but one who has fully entered into the trials of this life with us, so as to lift us out of them personally. So let's adore and praise Jesus with our hearts and minds, with our whole lives, for when we let Jesus truly be King of our hearts, then life is good, and eternal life is ours: *Jesus, You are Lord. You are risen from the dead and You are Lord. Every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus You are Lord, You are the Way.*