

Today on this Feast of Christ the King, we've heard two readings. They're both about Jesus reigning as king. And one of them is very challenging. The epistle we heard from Ephesians speaks of Christ the King with all the trappings that we normally associate with kingship. It speaks of Jesus seated in the heavenly places with authority and power and dominion, a name above every name, with all things under his feet. That's how we imagine a king. But then we turn to the gospel reading from Matthew, and this I think is much more challenging. Here's a king who identifies with the hungry, the poor, the stranger, and the prisoner, as Fleming Rutledge puts it, this is royalty that stoops, this is a humble King.

But it's not just this fact that makes this reading challenging. It's not just the understanding of kingship that's presented to us here. It's something else in the story that makes it disturbing. It's the idea of separation. As in the verse that says, "He will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." We live in a culture that doesn't like to talk much of separation. We're much more comfortable talking about inclusion. I remember my children's very right on elementary school. I remember sports day where there seems to be a reluctance to even separate the winners from the losers. It's not so in the gospel. Jesus spoke of separation. The sheep are going one way and the goats are going another.

Now, Jesus is using an image here that would be familiar to his original hearers. In those days, the shepherds while they were out in the fields during the day would have the sheep and the goats all together. But as night fell, the goats would be pulled to one side because they're not as hardy as sheep, so they need to be kept warm. We might not be so familiar with the image, but we certainly can get the message. There will be a day of reckoning and it will involve judgment and separation, some from others. How are we to respond to such a stark and challenging message?

Well, I'm sure that we'll have a variety of reactions, but let me offer one that might not be so obvious. Hope. And I want to say something about why I feel that this is the case, why this talk of judgment can bring me a degree of hope. And the main reason is

that judgment is always linked with justice. The Bible doesn't say that God is capricious and that he will execute some random judgment however he sees fit in the moment. No, his judgment is considered and it will establish peace and justice on the earth. Tom Wright, the great theologian, says this, "Justice is one of the most profound longings of the human race. If there is no justice, the deep within ourselves, we know that there is something out of joint. Justice is hard to define and harder still to put into practice, but that has never stopped human beings and societies seeking it, praying for it, and working to find ways of doing it better. And justice doesn't simply mean punishing wickedness though that is regularly involved. It means bringing the world back into balance."

We all recognize that the world is out of balance. That something's not quite right. Central to the Jewish and Christian traditions is the belief that this passionate longing for justice comes from God himself. We believe that God will at some point in time at the end of time, establish His justice on the earth. The world will one day be balanced again. There's a great picture of this in the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, where we read this, "See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more. For the first things have passed away." That's a snapshot of what it will be like in the kingdom of God when that kingdom is established and the reign of Jesus Christ is begun.

We are bombarded with images and stories from all over the world, and it's unrelenting the flow of sad and terrible stories that we get to hear. And of course, we're all aware this is only what we hear is only a tiny fraction of the sadness that there is in our world. And we might be led to think that the suffering in our world is so tragic, so unrelenting, that life can be rendered meaningless. And I can understand such a view. Now what prevents me from descending into such despair and hopelessness is the firm belief that this world from the never ending war in Syria to the sadnesses in my own life, do not go unnoticed, that God sees and will one day act to redeem all that has been lost. Suffering would render life futile if it were

the last word, but thank God it isn't. There will be a day when justice is done, when the world will be redeemed, one day that things will be put right, and God will wipe away every tear. The new kingdom will be established and peace and justice will reign.

There's something else about this passage which surprises me, and that's the grounds on which the separation is to be made. It's not based on the soundness of our beliefs or the knowledge we've amassed or the fame and fortune we've acquired, but on the help that we've given to others based on our compassion or lack thereof. Like all radical ideas, Jesus' teaching here is simple. The help which Jesus picks out, giving to a hungry person a meal, a thirsty person a drink, welcoming a stranger, chairing the sick, visiting the prisoner, they're all simple things. They don't require us to be affluent or in positions of influence. Any one can do them. It's a case of giving simple uncalculating help to the people that we meet in the course of our daily lives.

I was greatly encouraged this week to follow this way of compassion by an email I received from a man I knew in London who I'll call David. David was living on the streets and was possibly the angriest, certainly one of the most aggressive people that I've ever met. He was wild-eyed and normally shirtless. And he frightened everyone in the parish office when he came knocking on the door. And it got to the point that the staff refused to come to work till we had a new security system and we'd taken out a restraining order on him. And one day, I met David out on the street. We went to the park and shared a sandwich together. And as it came to the end of our time, I said, "David, can I pray for you?" And he said, "Well, only if you're let me pray for you." Which he did. And we shared a lovely moment together.

And I'm not sure if that was the last time I saw him. It was certainly one of the last times. And I hadn't heard from him for years till this week when out of the blue I got an email from him. And he'd been given my email address from a clergy friend in London. And he said this in his email, "I spent seven months in hospital and I want to thank you for supporting me while I was experiencing a manic episode. I could hear what people were saying to me, but I couldn't respond as I had so much going on in my head. I'm

sorry for my aggression I showed to you and your team. I'm thankful for the love and acceptance you showed me, allowing me to pray for you. I think you were brave to do that." And he concluded, "Keep on being kind to those who are struggling. It made a big difference to me."

I had no idea that the small thing I did for him made a difference. I was so pleased to hear from David and to discover that. And what we learned from our gospel reading today is that such apparently small acts of compassion not only make a difference, they're of eternal significance. At the end of time, it is only love, kindness, and compassion that will matter. We have a sense of an end, which helps us to see this world from its proper perspective, from God's perspective. And from that divine perspective of the new kingdom, we see what is of lasting value. And it's love, kindness, and compassion.

What this reading tells us is that God's perspective is very different to ours. We might want to look back at our lives and list our triumphs and achievements, but that's not what matters to God. The king in our story didn't put the high achievers on one side and everyone else on the other. No, he looked at how the sheep and the goats had treated people. He looked at how they lived their lives. Small things, things that could be easily overlooked, simple acts of kindness proved decisive. What the king recalls is the feeding of the hungry, the giving of a drink, the clothing of a stranger. If I'm to sum up this gospel reading in one sentence, it's this: Little things matter because they matter to God. Amen.