

Christ the King – Homily by Fr. Dan Donovan (Nov. 23, 2014)

With the Sunday liturgy this week and next, we bring the current **liturgical year** to an end and begin a new one. The gospel we just heard with its picture of the **final judgment** is more than appropriate for this time of the year. Jesus is identified in it initially as the **Son of Man** and then as a **shepherd** and finally as a **king**. The real purpose of the parable is the establishment of a **criterion for judgment**. It is both clear and concrete. What we have done or not done for the poor and the hungry, the homeless and the sick will determine where we stand before God and at the same time where we find ourselves in relation to a Christian understanding of what it is **to be human**.

The passage brings to an end in Matthew's gospel the **public teaching of Jesus**. As such it offers a perfect complement to the Sermon on the Mount which stands at the beginning of his public life and offers **a summary of his moral teaching**. It begins with the beatitudes in which Jesus declares blessed or happy the poor in spirit, the meek and the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for justice and who work for peace; it reaches a climax with its challenge to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us.

To hold either or both of these texts up in front of us a mirror is an enormously challenging thing. I for one certainly fall short of the ideal they embody.

Jesus mentions **6 categories of people** in today's reading. Clearly the list is not exhaustive. What he is talking about are **people in need**. Today we might expand the list to include **refugees** and **single mothers**, institutionalized elderly people abandoned by their families and abused children, victims of terrorism and war, women exposed to sexual harassment and worse.

A question that inevitably arises when we think about the forms and depths of suffering to which so many in our world are exposed, is what concretely **we are being called to do about it**. Although there are things that we can do **as individuals**, there is also much that we can't do. **Organizations**, religious and secular, can do more. They are able to work on a scale that is impossible for us as individuals. **Governments** are in a position to be even more effective. The challenge to us, in addition to our individual efforts, is to support the institutions and groups which are helping those in need and to pressure our elected representatives to take whatever steps they can to alleviate the problems and challenges they face.

St. John Chrysostom, a late fourth and early fifth century bishop of Constantinople spoke out often and forcefully against the dramatic disparity that existed at his time between **the rich and the poor**. He appealed to the rich to share their goods with the poor, arguing that such sharing ought to flow from the simple fact of our common humanity. "A person who lives only for him or herself," he affirmed, "does not belong to the human race." On another occasion he declared: "This is the rule of the most perfect Christianity, its most exact definition, its highest point, namely the seeking of the common good.... Nothing," he added, "can so make us imitators of Christ as **caring for our neighbours**."

Pope John Paul II in the course of his 1984 visit to Canada cited the example and teaching of John Chrysostom and said that in order to translate it into modern terms one would have to include "respect for human dignity and human rights; concern for women, for labourers, for the marginalized, for immigrants; establishment of social measures for greater equality and justice for all men and women, and all of that at the international as well as the national level.

The newspapers and the **electronic media** are full of stories that relate directly to the kind of attitudes and practices suggested by today's gospel. The headline in the Toronto Star last Wednesday read: "1.2 million Canadian children go to school hungry. 24 years ago," it went on, "politicians vowed to end child poverty by the year 2000. We know how to do it. We just lack the will." According to a recent report, the problem is particularly acute in Toronto where 29% of children live below the poverty line.

In the same day's paper, a former President of the Toronto Dominion Bank was quoted as urging well off Torontonians to be **more generous** in their support of affordable housing for those living on the margins and of help for the homeless. In his own way and in a very different context, he echoed the kind of appeal that John Chrysostom made to his contemporaries.

It is important that we see and respond to the **need of individuals** whatever need it might be. It is really only individuals and individual stories that touch our hearts and move us to compassion and mercy. In order, however, to make an effective contribution, we have to move beyond individuals and see the **larger social context** that cries out for a collective response whether it be that of an institution or organization or of some level of government.

For us as Christians, today's reading offers an additional motive for action. Whatever you do to one of these the least of my brothers or sisters, Jesus says, you do to me. **That thought is both challenging and empowering.**