

The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe: The Type of Kingdom

Today's feast concludes the Church year with this exclamation: Jesus Christ is King. He is the King of Kings. His Kingdom does not follow the model of kingdom we might have in our minds. He is a conquering Messiah, but his army is spiritual, not physical. He battles to restore life, not destroy life. He came down from heaven to bring us to heaven.

What will we find when we get there, when we get to heaven? We really do not know. We only know that it will be radically different than our fondest expectations. "What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, God has prepared for those who love him," we read in 1 Corinthians 2:9.

The great Anglican scholar C. S. Lewis wrote humorous essay about what we would experience if we were admitted into heaven. He wrote that there would be a triple surprise, more than this, a triple shock. First, Lewis wrote, we would be surprised at the people in heaven. We would be shocked that there are people there we never would have thought would be there. The second surprise would be the shock at realizing there were people we expected to be in heaven who were not there. The third surprise would be that we would be astonished that we were there.

We Catholics have only recently moved away from our rather arrogant and self centered view that we have exclusive rights to heaven. Sadly there are still some Christians who are ready to exclude others from the reward of the Father. They hear about the goodness of a Mahatma Gandhi, but they cannot get their heads around this. They cannot get themselves to believe that there might be a Hindu in heaven, let alone millions, billions, of good people who were never Christians. That would not follow the rules that the arrogant have made up for determining the Who's Who in heaven. Yes, there is no way to the Father except through the Son, but the Son's obedience to the Father sacrificing his life for us resulted in the Father and the Son sending the Holy Spirit to all people of good will. These people of good will are those who reach out to others in charity, and in so doing, reach out to the very presence of Christ in others, even if, like the sheep in today's Gospel, they do not recognize Christ. There will be many who have been saved by Christ who did not know Him by that name but who reached out to Him in others. There will be many in heaven whom we would not expect to be there.

C. S. Lewis's second conjecture is that there will be people missing from heaven whom we expected to be there. In our American denial of death, we try to ease our grief of death by canonizing our Loved Ones who have died. No matter who a person may be, we decide that they are in heaven after their death. For example, teenagers steal a car and then are killed in a horrible car accident. Alcohol and drugs are involved. Yet, their classmates are told that they are with God now. Or Grandpa dies. Children are told that God has taken him. (Don't do that—it makes God an agent of death, not life.) All of this has to more to do with our grief than the reality of God's gifts. Perhaps, and hopefully, the teenagers in the car accident and Grandpa are all with

God in heaven. But their presence in heaven will be determined not by our need for them to be there, but by how well they reached out to Christ in others throughout their lives. Their presence in heaven will be determined by the Just Judge who recognizes those who loved him throughout their lives. This same Just Judge will listen to others pleading that their Loved Ones be fully united to Him. It is a good thing to pray for the dead, as *Second Maccabees* says. Still, their presence in heaven is in God's hands, not ours. The souls of the just are in the hands of God. (Wisdom 3:1).

In the second book of the *Divine Comedy*, the *Purgatorio*, Dante Alighieri considered those who are being prepared for heaven. He has a fascinating thought. His consideration is that those who are not in heaven have not developed the ability to receive the fullness of God's love that is heaven. How is this tolerance of the fire of God's love developed? The tolerance for God's love can only be developed by exposing ourselves to Christ. "But when have we seen you hungry or naked, or ill or imprisoned, Lord?" the souls of those who did not expect to be in heaven asked in today's gospel. "I was present in those who reached out to you for help," the Lord responds. Their exposure to Christ's presence in others afforded them the capacity for receiving his presence in themselves.

There will be some who through the prayers of those on earth, will eventually be able to tolerate the vision of God, the Beatific Vision. We call those waiting for this spiritual gift to be fully developed within them souls in purgatory. We pray for them at their funerals, at special Masses we have for our loved ones, and particularly in this, the Month of All Souls.

There will also be some who have excluded God from their lives to such a degree that they have made war on His Presence in their lives. They will not be capable of tolerating his Love because they have not developed the slightest place for His Love within them. Those who will never receive the Beatific Vision are those who for all eternity do not want to receive the Beatific Vision. They have condemned themselves.

In his wit, C. S. Lewis says that the third surprise we would have if we took stock of the souls in heaven would be learning that we are there. When we are honest with ourselves, we are well aware of the many times that we have turned from God. Our sins are very clear to us. What we are not so aware of is the extent of God's mercy. He sees that as charity which we, though His grace, have developed as life style. He sees the ways that we have allowed Him to immerse us in Christianity to such an extent that we reach out to him without even recognizing His presence. He sees the ways that we do that which is only natural for us, the ways that Christianity has become a natural way of life for us. This continual grace in our lives pointing us to His Presence in others is a great mercy. He allows us to replace with love that which we have destroyed with selfishness and sin. We live in His mercy.

During the last twelve months we have followed the life of Jesus our Lord from the prophecies of last Advent, through his birth, mission, death and resurrection. We

have prayed over the message of His life as well as His teachings. Now, at the conclusion to the year we beg Him to help us recognize Him in our world and to acknowledge His presence by reaching out to Him on others. We seek the mercy of His continual grace drawing us out of ourselves and into His presence in the needy of his Kingdom.

Christ is our King. May we be true members of his Kingdom.