

On Sunday next the Church tradition is to celebrate the feast of Christ the King. It is an image at the heart of the Christian tradition, and finds expression in many of our hymns – for example All hail the power of Jesus' name, or Rejoice the Lord is King, or Crown him with many Crowns. Also we see the Kingship of Christ in countless stained-glass windows. For example the stained glass at the south side of St John's

Yet, there is a paradox at the heart of kingship, of any monarchy, or any kind of political or other leadership. Those who become leaders do so in order to serve their people, and to promote their well-being in every aspect of life. But the sad truth which we see so often on our news, is that the course of history is marked by leaders who have done exactly the opposite. They have taken power for their own selfish ends; they have sought personal gain at the expense of their people, and caused them enormous pain and suffering and deprivation – just think of Hitler, Pol-pot. In our own time, dictatorships still flourish, despite international disapproval, political pressures and commercial sanctions levelled against them. Just think about President Assad, or Kim Jung-Un.

The Gospels tell us that the fullest expression of the paradox of leadership is to be found in the life of Jesus. Born in humble circumstances, he lived in obscurity for some 30 years before coming face to face with his vocation at his baptism by John in the River Jordan.

That vocation was challenged as Jesus underwent spiritual testing in the wilderness. It was only then that he emerged to fulfill his call to leadership, and embrace all that lay before him. None of the claims that Jesus made was for himself – his was a leadership of servanthood.

Some were astounded at his teaching, because he mixed with those on the edge of society, the poor and needy, and yet he spoke with authority – that of a high priest. Others were offended and threatened by Jesus' model of leadership through service, and sought his removal. Perhaps neither side could fully understand that in all his preaching, teaching and healing, Jesus sought to promote not himself, but the glory of God.

However, there is one expression which recurs many times in the Gospels. Jesus refers to himself as “the Son of Man”. “The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” This verse from St Mark’s Gospel carries perhaps the ultimate expression of leadership through service and self-sacrifice, but it also carries with it overtones of the kingship of Christ. It is the same Son of Man who in our reading today will come “in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his throne of glory”.

As Christians, we share in the glory and the kingship of Christ. 1 Peter 2:9 calls us “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people”. That is a high calling to live up to. The parable of the sheep and the goats in today’s Gospel tells us that we fulfil our calling – and are judged in our calling – by our willingness to see Christ in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the

naked, the sick and those in prison. Jesus appears to be giving us here his Manifest for social involvement. It is an area in which the Church, in spite of its many failings, has been active over long periods of time. It is an area in which many of us already make our own personal contribution towards.

I'm sure you know who Tony Campolo is. But if you don't, I would recommend that you buy one of his many books. He is a well known Christian leader in America, and previously a lecturer in Sociology, now Professor Emeritus at Eastern University, Pennsylvania. Let me read you something he said about our calling to those in need.

'Whenever you meet a suffering person, you will find that Jesus is there waiting to be loved in that individual. That's why Jesus said, "whatever you do for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you do for me." You cannot reach out to a person in need, you cannot embrace somebody who's hurting, you cannot minister to somebody who is in desperate straits, without having that eerie and wonderful awareness, that Jesus is coming back at you right through that person'.

Tony tells a story: He says, 'I was walking down the street in Philadelphia and a bum came towards me. I mean a dirty, filthy guy. He was covered with soot from head to toe. You couldn't believe how messed up he was. He had this huge beard and there was a piece of rotted food stuck in the beard. As he approached me, he held out a cup of McDonald's coffee and said, "Hey mister, want some of my coffee?"

I looked at this dirty, filthy man and said, "Thanks, but that's okay," and I walked by him. The minute I passed him, I knew I was doing the wrong thing, so I turned around and said, "Excuse me. I would like some of your coffee." I took some of the coffee and sipped it and gave it back to him. I said, "You're being generous. How come you're being so generous today?"

And this bum looked at me and he said, "Because the coffee was especially delicious today and I think that when God gives you something good, you ought to share it with people."

Tony says, 'I didn't know how to handle that, so I said, "Can I give you anything?" I thought that he would hit me for five dollars.

He said, "No." Then he said, "Yeah, yeah. I've changed my mind, there is something you can give me. You can give me a hug."

I was hoping for the five dollars!

He put his arms around me and I put my arms around him. And as I, in my suit and tie, and he in his filthy garb hugged each other on the street, I had the strange awareness that I wasn't hugging a bum, I was hugging Jesus. I found Jesus in that suffering man.'

And so in the paradox of Christ as Sovereign Lord, in all his Glory, worthy of all our praise and worship, we are challenged by Christ the servant King, the one of compassion and of suffering, the one who a few days ago at our Remembrance service described himself in John's Gospel Chapter 15 that, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends".

Jesus is telling us that his kingship is to be seen in those who are in need. Jesus is telling us that his kingship is to be seen in our willingness to '**suffer alongside'** (that's what the word compassion means) those in need. That in caring for them, we are giving Christ the glory. And so as we look on those around us in need, may we ever be mindful of our desire to serve Christ through our compassion for them. May we ever be mindful of Christ the King, who stoops low to be a servant to all of humanity who have the deepest of needs love.

Amen.