

Some words for Our Lord Jesus Christ, Universal King

*'Crown Him with many crowns, the Lamb upon His throne.
Hark! How the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own.
Awake, my soul, and sing, of Him who died for thee,
And hail Him as thy matchless King through all eternity.'*¹



Readings:

Ezekiel 34:11-12. 15-17

Psalm 22:1-3. 5-6. R.v.1

1 Corinthians 15:20-26. 28

Matthew 25:31-46

Dear Parishioners of St Joseph's & St Charles,

As we celebrate today the great feast of Christ our King we are presented with much to ponder about the purpose of government, law and the pursuit of happiness. The ongoing pandemic continues to see pressure being applied to governments and politicians across the globe. Setting aside the recent electioneering in the United States, it is not so much the political colour of their decisions that dominates discussion but rather their basic competence or correctness. It is well over two millennia since the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle observed that *'man is by nature a political animal.'*² Aristotle understood that by forming partnerships with others we might more easily achieve the goal of a 'better' life, and he would not have been at all surprised to see that it is the most critical decisions effecting our common life that continue to be the most hotly debated. The reasons for this are principally twofold.

Firstly, whilst we would want to agree with Aristotle that creation and humanity are 'ordered' towards the good nonetheless we recognise that ignorance, pride, prejudice, avarice and a whole host of other very human factors influence the laws and decisions of those who govern. Whatever the insights into our decision-making that we have gained by way of science we Christians would also identify the presence and effects of sin, and, whether it be the splinter in our brother's eye or the plank in our own,³ it brings about disharmony and disintegration. How many of us have been sat watching the news and condemned the behaviour of others during this pandemic while conveniently forgetting our own little lapses in conduct?

Secondly, whatever regulation or law it is that we disagree with, we will often do so, to some degree, because of its aim or purpose. Aristotle would have regarded a government's function as principally aimed at enabling - or at least not hindering - the individual's pursuit of happiness, through the accumulation of virtue or honour, for example. It is possible that our own classically inclined Prime Minister may feel the same, though it is perhaps rather more difficult to discern if this is the view that Her Majesty's Government would take. What we can say though is that Aristotle's view was taken up and further shaped by the spread and influence of Christianity. As perhaps best expressed by St Thomas Aquinas, the Christian understood that by virtue of the gift of God, i.e. grace, we possess the light of reason to comprehend good and evil. Our choices and actions may thus be guided accordingly and so our laws, as Aquinas expressed it, '*should be an ordinance of reason for the common good.*'⁴ I find that if I spend my time thinking about the current regulations as restrictions placed upon me then I think one thing, if I regard them as sacrifices that I must make for others then I think something else entirely.

These past few weeks we have heard Jesus say, '*the kingdom of heaven is like,*'⁵ but that is not the case today. On the contrary, in today's gospel Jesus begins with the words, '*When the Son of Man comes in his glory,*'⁶ and he thus immediately makes it clear that he is foretelling something that is to come. Yes, we have had a number of parables warning us what we must do to prepare for the future coming of the Lord but now, finally, here it is described; this is what the Day of Judgement will look like. It is in sharp contrast to the Lord's first coming, when he was born in the obscurity of the manger, for this coming will see him '*escorted by all the angels [and seated] on his throne of glory.*'⁷ Jesus had already told his disciples that he would return in glory and that he would '*reward each one according to his behaviour,*'⁸ and so it is that '*all the nations*'⁹ are to be assembled before him and separated as '*the shepherd separates sheep from goats.*'¹⁰

In his Passion Jesus would testify to Pilate that he was a king.¹¹ His return will leave no room for doubt. Some scholars, and a significant and ancient tradition within the church, interpret all the nations as all those non-Christians who are to be judged on how they have treated '*the least of these brothers of mine.*'¹² However, given that today's feast hails the Christ as Universal King then I think we should look upon it

within the context of the later tradition that understands Jesus as addressing everyone. What is certain is that Jesus is dispensing just and legitimate judgement upon the virtuous and the damned.

It is the majestic will of the Father that the righteous should receive for their heritage, *'the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world.'*¹³ As in a legal process, this estate – the kingdom – has been freely bequeathed as a gift, by an act of will and testament of the Father and the Son, from the very beginning. It is an inheritance that St Peter will later remark, *'can never be spoilt or soiled and never fade away, because it is being kept for you in the heavens.'*¹⁴ Although we cannot lay claim to God's bounty by our own efforts we can nonetheless be confident that if we do certain things he will richly reward us.

The basis for the division between the sheep and the goats is love and mercy, generosity and compassion, and the six deeds of mercy listed by the Lord are most certainly not meant to be exhaustive. There are as many good works to be done as there are legitimate human needs to be answered. The sinfulness that ends up tainting societies and cultures, economies and institutions means that many needs of course lie outside the possibility of individual resolution and we know that the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world¹⁵ will judge and deal with those too. What matters here however, is that it is those acts of mercy or omission that are within our realm and power to exercise and perform, which will provide the basis for each individual to be judged. After all, the very basic nature of say, the food, drink, or visiting that our Lord gives as examples, indicates that we are all capable of such simple mercies. As the surprise of those sorted onto the right or left of the king demonstrates, it turns out that these things can be ridiculously simple and yet, at times, maddeningly difficult also.

The example of the king who *'came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many,'*¹⁶ stands before us today. This may not appear to be common sense or the way of the world, but it is an ordinance of God's reason, the Way of the Cross, and this is how we are best to serve the common good as followers of the Lord. Common wisdom would suggest that if we want to rule others we must first learn to rule ourselves. The Christian however must add to this for we know that, paradoxically, we are invited by the Lord to best serve our own true interests by making sure we serve others first.

A possible burden for many present-day Christians, at least currently in the West, is to live surrounded by the physical, intellectual and cultural reminders of the past glories of the Christian faith. Our faith has motivated and inspired many, and it has done much to shape our current world and so many of its finer values. Yet, rather like the servant who buried the one talent, we might be tempted these days to feel that our efforts will not make much of a difference and that people will not take much notice of us anymore. Now, while Marcus Rashford's successful advocacy for

school meal vouchers may stand as a testimony to the place of celebrity and football in our present culture, the news that football fans - notoriously tribal and blinkered with regards to their clubs – have successfully shamed an end to pay-per-view football by donating money to foodbanks instead, should be a lesson and encouragement to us all.

Setting aside the pandemic and all its ills, the age-old act of balancing the rights of the individual against the obligation of the public good conditions all our daily lives. The words of today's gospel and the example of the Servant King make clear where for us the emphasis should lay. Despite the many challenges we face we should always remain hopeful, for we may pursue any and every day, our individual happiness by seeking to serve the common good. As Pope Francis so often reminds us, the world needs to both see and experience the supreme law of Christian love that we say is written in our hearts. Whatever the political challenges our world places before us we must always strive to offer faithful example as true subjects of the King. After all, Christian charity may reach and rule in all the places that the law does not see or cannot touch and *'your father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you.'*¹⁷

*'Shepherd-king, o'er mountains steep, homeward bring the wandering sheep;
shelter in one royal fold, states and kingdoms, new and old.
Angels, saints and nations sing: "Praise be Jesus Christ our King;
Lord of life, earth, sky and sea, King of love on Calvary!"'*¹⁸

Our Lady of Walsingham, pray for us

St Joseph, pray for us

St Charles Borromeo, pray for us

With my prayers,

Rev. Mark McManus

Parish Priest

20 November 2020

The picture is of *Ecce Homo!* Mihály Munkácsy, (1844-1900), The Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest

1. *Crown Him with many crowns*, verse 1, Matthew Bridges (1800-94)
2. *Politics*, Book 1, 1253, Aristotle
3. *Matthew* 7:5
4. *Summa theologiae*, I-II, 90, 4, St Thomas Aquinas
5. *Matthew* 25:1 & *Matthew* 25:16
6. *Matthew* 25:31
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Matthew* 16:27
9. *Matthew* 25:32
10. *Ibid.*

11. *John* 18:37
12. *Matthew* 25:40
13. *Matthew* 25:34
14. *1 Peter* 1:4
15. *John* 1:29
16. *Matthew* 20:28
17. *Matthew* 6:4
18. *Hail, Redeemer, King divine!* verse 4, Patrick Brennan CSsR, (1877-1952)