

Christ the King – 2017

Those of you who were at the last Family Service would remember that I spoke about names. I am rather fascinated by names, I think they are important, as you might remember I challenged the Bard who famously wrote 'what's in a name!' I happen to think there is a great deal in our names and I enjoy thinking about names. When Tim and Mel said they were calling their newborn Taryn I looked it up. I found it was name that was used in numerous cultures and it means various things...young, queen, little princess; what of the Bible? Well in Hebrew I'm told it means 'wild goat!' Well that rather put the damper on my sermon; so I had to return to the drawing board, I thought about my name.

We have just recently celebrated the feast of St Martin of Tours. So I thought again about St Martin and I thought about the story of Martin the Roman Centurion giving half his cloak to the naked beggar sitting beside the road on a freezing night. Later that same night so the legend goes Martin, in a dream, saw that piece of cloak wrapped around the shoulders of Jesus and I thought about today's reading, Jesus says: 'I was naked and you gave me clothing.' But of course the reading doesn't end there, there are beggars who are still cold, naked, when this Martin, the one standing before you has a wardrobe full of clobber! Rather remorsefully I again returned to the drawing board! I thought again about my namesake and I found another legend about him which I had not heard before. Bishop Martin, as he had become, was at home one day when there came a knock at his door. He answered it, and there was a man standing there who claimed to be Jesus. Martin suspected that the man might actually be the devil, the angel of darkness, who had come to tempt him. He decided that he would put the man to the test. So, he asked him, what sin is it that most often grips me that I have had to confess to you over and over again? Without hesitation the man at the door said, "I don't remember!" "I don't remember!" And Martin welcomed His Lord into his home.

I read a fine meditation on the Letter to the Hebrews recently by Pope Francis. He dwelt on a passage of chapter eight: For I will be merciful towards their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more. The passage he suggests reveals "something beautiful about the way God forgives: God forgets". He goes on to quote from the old Testament prophets: "Your sins shall be cast into the sea, and though they are red like blood, they shall become white as a lamb" (cf. Mic 7:19; Is 1:18).

Francis reminds us that God doesn't forgive as we do. "He forgives and forgets". And Francis asks himself, "if He forgets, who am I to remember the sins of others?" Thus, the Father "forgets, always forgives, forgives all, celebrates when He forgives, and He forgets, because He wants to reconcile, He wants to encounter us".

He wants to encounter us. Today we are given the chance to appreciate the nature of this God who wants to encounter us. We are celebrating today Christ as King, a title that perhaps sits uncomfortably with some. But this is no ordinary king. On one hand King Jesus is the exalted Lord who comes in glory attended by the whole court of heaven, possessing and exercising all power in heaven and earth. And yet this same King is also publicly declaring himself to be at one with 'the least of my brothers and sisters.' Jesus spans this gulf which we can barely imagine between the awesomeness of divine power, the creator of the universe and the very poorest, most vulnerable in our midst. In this very text the greatest commandment 'love God and your neighbour' comes into sharp focus, Jesus tells us they are the same! This King is no aloof monarch but someone we can meet and engage with, he wants to encounter us. This text from Matthew's gospel really is one of those crucial texts in the Christian tradition.

The sacraments are all about encounter. In baptism and Eucharist we encounter God in the sacraments that Christ has bequeathed to us as modes of encounter. Today Taryn encounters God in Christ through the waters of Baptism. It is one of those events that defies explanation; but ultimately it is about encounter and encounter is about reconciliation and reconciliation is about forgiveness. In Baptism she is sharing in Christ, becoming one in Christ's life, all of it! Now of course that doesn't mean sweetness and light! We all know that, life is not like that and if we lead full lives, if we endeavor in our own way to live as Christ we will find that sometimes it is tough, let alone all the other issues that we face in everyday life, as we know 'life wasn't meant to be easy!' So we are not inoculating Taryn today from life today we are plunging her into it! Baptism is not about escape it is about reality. Reality is about encounter and encounter is about reconciliation and reconciliation is about forgiveness.

This plunging into baptism is about new life, but this new life, this spiritual life is like our natural lives something that needs to be nurtured, encouraged and fed. The role of Godparents above all is to model Christlikeness and above all that is to show Taryn what it is to know and to offer forgiveness; and in this way we are indeed the sheep on the right hand side. The difference between the sheep and goats is that those on the right have encountered God in Christ, they are reconciled and forgiven. They are not perfect but God has forgotten their faults and failings. The others are not perfect either, but they have not encountered God, they have not known reconciliation and have not known God's forgiveness (and forgetfulness). Alienation is their lot.

Our salvation is not won just by these acts of mercy. We are saved because we believe that we are forgiven when we fail. "Your sins shall be cast into the sea, and though they are red like blood, they shall become white as a lamb." Amen.