

## Christ the King 2008

Ezekiel 34 vv 11-24 p865, Psalm 95, Ephesians 1 vv 15-23 p1173, Matthew 25 vv 31-46 p995

This year, the Gospel reading for Christ the King reveals Him as the Judge of the human race. Christ will judge all the nations. He will judge every human being. So we celebrate. The world cries out for Justice. God is just and God is in control. Justice will, therefore, prevail.

By what criterion will Jesus judge the world? He will judge us by the way we treat other people. He says: *Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.* This makes absolute and instant sense when we speak of our Christian brethren. Christ dwells in us and we in Him. So whatever anyone does to a Christian it is the same as doing it to Him. Charity cannot, however, stay at home. Good works cannot be confined to the household of faith. The point of the parable of the Good Samaritan is that it answers the question *Who is my neighbour?* The answer is not that my neighbour is my brother, my friend, my coreligionist or my compatriot. All human beings are my brothers and my neighbours because they were all made to be children of God in His image (just as I was and so were you) and Christ died for each one of them (just as He died for you and for me) and so Paul writes to Timothy that Christ came into the world to save sinners and it is God's Will that everyone should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.

As, therefore, we are to be judged by the way we treat other people, we must ask how ought we to treat other people? Jesus answers that question for us with what is often called the Golden Rule: *all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.*

So we are to treat other people as we would treat Jesus, which is the same thing as saying we should treat other people the way Jesus would treat them, and that we should treat other people the way that we should like to be treated.

The particular example I want to consider this year is the way we treat older people. Abbeyfield Kent, a Christian charity which provides places for older people to live, now has its headquarters in Cuxton (in the old basket factory down by the river) and wants us to think about the way we can offer older people the love and care which we would hope to receive ourselves. For all sorts of reasons, people are living longer and the proportion of the population who are senior citizens is rising rapidly. This is a good thing which we all welcome. You only have to look around our churches and the two villages to see a large number of older people leading very full lives and often caring for others. But it also means that there is a growing number of people who are suffering from diseases of old age, everything from arthritis to dementia, and who may be unable to look after themselves or easily to take a full part in the life of the community. What would we want for ourselves if we became housebound or were forced to go into a home, or if we became unable to perform basic functions like feeding ourselves or taking a bath, or if we developed some form of dementia which cut us off from the world around us, our loved ones and our friends, and perhaps even from our memories? I am sure we would hope to be treated with compassion and respect and that we would also hope to be looked after insofar as we needed help.

What can we do for the elderly in our community, especially given that so many of us are getting old ourselves? I think we need to support a social framework in which politicians, officials, health and social services professionals feel that they have the support of the community in treating the elderly with the respect they are entitled to as human beings and in providing resources of people and services at whatever cost is necessary. This might mean, for example, a daily carer for the housebound or a post office, doctor's surgery, shops and other services within walking distance for people who cannot drive, do not have easy access to public transport and are unable to walk very far.

We might be able to offer monetary support to research into the diseases of old age such as dementia. We could perhaps encourage politicians, pharmaceutical companies and research scientists to put as much effort into finding treatments and even cures for these diseases as we do for higher profile conditions such as cancer and heart disease.

Strangely, although most churches are predominantly made up of older people, the Church can have a bit of a blind spot regarding the needs of the elderly. High on our agenda is the need to bring in children and young people. We are prone to speak of youth as the Church of the future and to ignore the needs of older people even within our own congregations. I used to go to a particular church when I was on holiday in Bournemouth. They used to lament that they had so many old people in their congregation. I pointed out to them that most of the people who lived in that part of Bournemouth were old and that, in fact, they were very successful in reaching the people God had given them. Our agenda, as a Church, must be to reach out to and strive to meet the needs of everybody who lives in the parish, young or old, rich or poor, men and women. We need to pray for grace to see past our blind spots, to draw up an agenda to meet God's vision of an all-encompassing Church, rather than our own vision for what we think a Church should be.

Strange, perhaps, that I only now come to prayer. Prayer is the most important thing we can do, the foundation of everything else. Pray for older people and their needs. Pray for people who look after older people – those who do so as wives or husbands or grown up children, those who do so as caring neighbours, voluntary workers with charities, and all the professional carers, providing care in the community, working in residential homes, medical and ancillary staff in hospitals. We've been asked to pray for Abbeyfield and their work. Maybe we have a special responsibility to pray for the headquarters staff working in our own parish.

We may become volunteers with a recognised charity such as Abbeyfield. But I am sure that the best thing that most of us can do is simply to be a friend. I know that most of us do this already and it comes quite naturally. Talk to people in the street. Visit them if you think a visit would be welcome. Be hospitable. Maybe offer some practical help, like shopping or gardening if you can. Giving lifts can be a great help. Be sensitive to what people need and what they want. Always treat people with respect. And make sure they don't drop off the radar if they become increasingly housebound or if they are bereaved. One recently widowed lady asked me to ask her neighbours to carry on talking to her the way they used to. She says they seem embarrassed to speak to her now that her husband has died. In short, *all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.*