

KINGSHIP OF CHRIST – A HOLY FEAR OF GOD

Of all the difficult jobs and professions around today, I think teaching must be one of the hardest. Looking back to my own secondary school days not only were there teachers to whom we gave hell, there were also teachers who gave us hell!

As pupils we were very quick to spot chinks in the teacher's armour, and then exploit them to the full especially substitute teachers or clergy in to teach RE! But there were also teachers you didn't mess around with.

One teacher in particular comes to mind. In his class you didn't look sideways, or talk to your neighbour or not pay attention. Discipline in his class was always rock solid.

Yet I remember that same teacher once took us on a school trip and he was a completely different person, telling us jokes, doing card tricks and full of fun.

It was almost as if he were two people, with two distinct and different sides to his character.

And this came to mind as I thought of the two very different images of God that we have in our readings this morning.

In The Revelation to John – he recounts his vision of heaven, with God seated in majesty upon his throne.

His description of heaven is, as the Americans might say, “awesome!” There are flashes of lightning, peals of thunder, and around the throne are the 24 elders dressed in white robes with golden crowns on their heads, ceaselessly praising God. The scene is all about the greatness and majesty of God in heaven.

And then in the Gospel, we have the very contrasting picture of Jesus. Paul describes Jesus as “the visible likeness of the invisible God”, yet, though God, Jesus, beaten, tortured stands as a common criminal before Pilate, the cruel and corrupt Roman governor.

Pilate wears the pristine white toga of authority. Jesus wears the tattered, blood-stained clothes of a felon.

Two very contrasting images indeed!

As John’s vision of heaven continues in the next chapter of Revelation, he sees Jesus beside the throne and this is how John describes Jesus - as both “the Lion of Judah” and “the Lamb who was slain.”

So in today’s readings we have that contrast between what Graham Kendrick’s hymn calls “meekness and majesty”, and a few verses on in Revelation the description of Jesus as both the Lion and the Lamb.

Not two different Gods. Not Jesus as two different persons but two aspects of the same person, which is why my strict yet funny school teacher came to mind.

Up to 50 years ago or so, I think it would be true to say that the Church emphasised more the majesty of God than the meekness of God. He was “immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes”

And there was, in those days, a lot of fear connected with religion. Many preachers didn't hold back about judgement and hell. God was not to be messed with. You had a holy fear of God.

And then came the 60's! Rock 'n' Roll, Ban-the Bomb, Hippies and Eastern mysticism, and of course the Beatles with their message of All you Need is Love.

And not only was society 'all shook up' – so was the Church. From the 60s into the 70s in many churches the shackles were well and truly loosened by movements like Charismatic Renewal. As coloured televisions transformed the old black and white screen, so in the Church preaching, the love of God replaced the fear of God, liturgy was released from its 1662 straight-jacket, and there was an explosion of hymn writing not seen since the time of the Wesley brothers.

And on into the 80s we all got pally with God. Many of the hymns and choruses of the time were all about me and Jesus, me and my God in an almost cosy, clubby and exclusive relationship. It was 1st person singular religion.

And, to be fair, it was a necessary corrective to the almost cold, austere and fearful relationship many had with God up to then.

But sometimes the pendulum can swing too far and that's why a Sunday, dedicated to Christ the King, can help find a proper balance.

What I mean is that whereas we rightly rejoice and give thanks for God's love for each of us, a love that is personal and particular, yet we mustn't let ourselves become so arrogant and presumptuous that we lose a sense of awe, respect and reverence before God, the king seated on his throne in heaven. This is reflected in the very top of our east window.

And we mustn't so presume upon his love that we think any old thing and any old attitude will do for God and treat him as not that important. Sure, he'll be grateful that we think of him now and again!

In many places the Bible talks about The Fear of the Lord. Yes, religion is about a personal relationship with God through Jesus. Yes, Jesus is Brother, Friend and Shepherd. Yes, he loves us as if there were only one person left to love. But it must not descend to the level where we lose a sense of awe and reverence before God and where we act as if God should be grateful for our love and attention and not the other way round.

The meekness of the Lamb must be balanced by the majesty of the Lion.

A Sunday dedicated to the image of Jesus as Christ the King is a good corrective, a good reminder of the majesty of God – not in the sense that we are to be afraid of God but that we properly respect and reverence him as Lord of All and King of kings, and so approach him in humility and awe.

In Romans chapter 11, Paul speaks of how kind and severe God is – severe towards the proud and the self-righteous, but kind to those whom acknowledge their need of his love, grace and forgiveness.

It's not one or the other, but the balance between meekness and majesty, Jesus the Lamb and Jesus the Lion.

Psalm 111 says this, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. A good understanding have all those who do his commandments. His praise endures for ever."

And there we have it in a nutshell – a proper respect for God resulting in worship and obedience and the doing of his will. Our love responding to God's love.

We didn't mess with my teacher. There was discipline in his class but we knew he actually cared, and therefore we respected him.

Let us in the beauty of this place stand in awe and wonder as we worship Almighty God who reaches out to each one of us.