

Sunday, November 24th, 2019, Reign of Christ

Readings: Ezekiel 34:16-24, Luke 1:68-79 (Song of Simeon), Colossians 1:11-20, Matthew 25:31-46 (Year A Gospel)

The Reign of Christ: Busting Mythologies

Introduction

We invariably see ourselves, we people of the 21st century as rational people, people who make decisions on the basis of observation and evidence, empirical people. But to think of ourselves in that way, is to delude ourselves, fool ourselves, since our worldviews – the ways we see ourselves and others – are a much more complicated and convoluted thing. We are and always have been also, people who tell stories about ourselves and others, and these stories shape, mould the way we see things. Sometimes these stories that are culturally bound, carry mythical overtones, nuances that encourage us to see the world around us in “binary” terms, dividing the world up into “us and them”, “goodies and baddies”, “insiders and outsiders”. It is through these binary definitions that we reassure ourselves of our identity: “we are not them, and they are not us”. In the film clip from the acclaimed French movie, (*Au revoir les enfants* – Good Bye Children), we observe the experience of a French Christian school, run by the Carmelites in occupied France during World War II. In a world where binary definitions were established in the political discourse, Jews were excluded from the main-stream, which itself was grounded in a sort of pagan Nordic mythology, a firm belief in the northern European, as “*lichtmenschen*”, men of light, men of energy and strength, men of deep thought. It is against this mythology of superiority, exclusion and persecution, that Père (Father) Jean as principle of the school, pushes back, secretly including and shielding Jewish students. As we witness the end of the film, we watch the mythological, irrational overtones of Nazi doctrine, as we see the heartbreaking moment: Père Jean and three Jewish children are marched out to their deaths. And yet, there is hope, as the school cries out almost as a symbolic act of rebellion “*Au revoir mon Père*” and he responds “*Au revoir les enfants. A bientôt*” (Goodbye children. See you soon). Hope, hope, has the final word, the last word, although muted. And then they are gone.

The Gospel

These myths, these mythologies that curse our communities and societies with their dark excluding binary worldviews – identity politics – are challenged front and centre by the Christian understanding of the reign of Christ. Let’s examine briefly the Gospel reading before us on this last day of the church year, as it sets out the biblical worldview. So, “What does the reign of Christ look like”? We can say two things:

First, that the Biblical world view of the kingdom, rejects a shallow opposition between good guys and bad guys, between insiders and outsiders. It is altogether much broader and intelligent than that. Yes, the passage does begin with the binary idea of, the opposition between sheep and goats, but it moves beyond this very quickly, to the fundamental point of compassion and justice for those who are the “least” (*elachistoi*): “Truly I tell you, when you did it for the least important...you did it to me”. The kingdom idea is this: that we are all interdependent, that in living compassionately and justly, ***all, all*** of us are dignified. To the contrary, ***all, all*** of us are diminished. In that sense the kingdom vision is universalistic, all inclusive.

Second, the Biblical world view rejects a shallow creedal opposition between Christians and others. How often have you heard the language that Christians often use, as they divide the world up between Christians and non-Christians? In the passage, the people who think they are insiders because they hold to the Christian creed, who think they are guaranteed divine approval, are surprised when they are challenged. In fact, so set are they upon their own faith status and inclusion in the kingdom, that they miss the point altogether: namely that it is not what you claim for yourself as a believer that ultimately matters, it is what you do with the belief. And so, their question, immersed in their myopic religious identity, and blind to those beyond them... : but ‘When, Lord, did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and... would not help you?’ The answer is clear: to the extent that you did nothing for them, you did nothing for me. Even the most eloquent faith can be a sham: at best, sincerely held but tragically misguided and mistaken, or at worst a cover-up for brutality.

The reign of Christ on this day of Christ the King, questions and challenges our binary mythologies. The Biblical worldview will have nothing to do with barbarous hard-wired mythological distinctions between human beings. Père Jean understood that, Père Jean shone in the dark as a voice for the kingdom.