

## **SERMON**

**given at Resurrection, Christ the King, 25 October 2020 by the Superior-General of the Guild**

A worldwide health epidemic killing millions of people all over the world. Dictators and strong men seizing power in countries everywhere. A strong America First movement betraying our place in the world. Not entirely recovered from a battering war, many families are grieving. Racism on the rise, and anti-Semitism too, not only far away but in our own country. Bitterly contested elections in this country and in others of the Western World. Falling influence of the Church and of Christianity in the wake of tragedy. Many people no longer interested in believing in a God who would “let this happen” – when in fact human beings had caused most of it. Established institutions failing, social norms discarded, an unpopular social policy that was followed to the letter by some, and brazenly ignored by others. Unrest, uproar and strife seem to spring up everywhere over everything.

2020? No, I'm referring to 1925. Millions had died in the Spanish influenza all over the world, more than had been killed in the Great War, many more. Mussolini was dictator of Italy, the Nazis just beginning their meteoric rise to power in Germany. A militaristic Japan was making plans to attack and seize China and Korea. Americans had become uninterested in their relationships with the rest of the world and refused to join the League of Nations, virtually condemning it to failure, and ostrich-like burying their heads in the sand. The Ku Klux Klan was at an all time high, with hundreds of thousands of members, in the North and South, who staged a march on Washington. The Wilson Administration, having segregated the races in the Government and Washington itself, ignored the Spanish flu, treating it as a public relations problem, and there were countless unnecessary deaths as a result. Churches had great difficulty rebuilding after the Spanish flu epidemic and being closed for nearly two years in many cities, and so many men coming back from the War or families who had lost loved ones in the epidemic, no longer felt close to God, or had any interest in him. Prohibition was the law of the land, but while many rejoiced in it, the other half of the country flouted it openly. Public health crises followed one after another: my father and some of his family had the Spanish flu in 1919 but survived, and my mother and one of her brothers got polio in 1929. The social and economic displacement and unrest which followed the Great War and the revolutions attendant on it, continued throughout the following decade, and in a sense were simply replaced only by the resumption of war in 1939.

We may sometimes think that our own time is better than any before – that would have been a common view in 1910, progress was absolute and unstoppable, and things could only get better. How wrong they were.

We sometimes think our times are unprecedentedly terrible and have no answers. We may think the problems we have and what we must face are more than any previous generation. But 1925 was not so different from 2020.

Why do I single out 1925? Because it was the year that Pope Pius XI established the Feast of Christ the King for the last Sunday of October. He wanted to address these problems and the feeling of malaise and desperation about things by reminding people that although they may have lost their sovereign in 1918 and a monarchy of a thousand years disappeared overnight, though there may have been a revolution, though their own homes might now be in a different country than they were though not having moved an inch, though the War had been horrible beyond belief, though there was widespread genocide in its wake, and though dictators were taking control on the right, and Communist revolutions on the left, that Christ was still King of All.

He chose the last Sunday of October so that the feast would fit in with All Saints Day and All Souls Day which would then always follow during the same week. The message of the feast is that Christ is King of the Saints in Heaven – that is real and Heaven remains our goal, and it is as important a quest for us as ever, indeed it is the reason for our lives here on earth. Christ is the King of All Souls, purifying them in love to be ready to be with him in Heaven. His love and mercy do not end with death, they extend beyond the grave. That is not a doctrine of Dante-esque terror, it is a doctrine of love and mercy. We pray for the dead not because we fear their torture and damnation, we pray for them because we loved them and want to be in communication, in prayer, with God about them as they are now, or at least as we assume they are now. As St Thomas Becket said, “Many a soul we pray for in our Requiem Masses are already with God in Heaven”. But love is never a waste of time or a loss of energy – all love goes into God, because that is the only word that can define him. If our loved ones we pray for are already

with him, it is the church's doctrine that our prayers are applied to others who need them. So Christ is King of the Church Expectant, in Purgatory, waiting to be with him in Heaven. He never leaves them, even as they are being purified and waiting to see Him.

But Christ is also King of this world, the Church Militant here on Earth. At times, that is hard for us to remind ourselves. One of those times was 1925, another is 2020.

The first thing to remember is that so many things we find frightening, anxious, malicious, evil, are things that mankind has done to itself. The writer E. M. Forster said in the 1920s that he could not believe in a God that could allow the Great War to take place with its horror, death and suffering. Even George Bernard Shaw, an atheist, replied, "I was under the impression it was the Kaiser who declared war on us, not God Almighty".

So there are some things which we must take responsibility for: the righteousness of our society, how the least among us are treated, how those who have much behave towards those who have least, what our governments are like and how they manifest what we believe in. All these things are Christian responsibilities as well as good citizenship.

But there are things which rest with God and with him alone: epidemics, natural disasters, and so on (though our responses to these ARE our responsibility). Many peoples and religions of the past have interpreted these as being God's judgement on them having committed some sin. The Old Testament is full of this. But when Our Lord himself was asked by his own disciples of a blind man, "Who sinned? This man or his father that he is blind?" Our Lord responded, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him."

That is what we must clutch to ourselves on this Feast of Christ the King. Some of the terrible things of our time have been caused by human beings, and they are things which must be righted by human beings. Other things simply happen in the scheme of the way the world works, and they happen in order that the works of God should be made manifest in us. In other words: what do they bring out in us? What do they show about us as we respond to things that happen to us, to our loved ones, and to society as a whole? The real question to-day then is the one pertinent in 1925, "Is Christ to be the King of the World?" That question God asks us every day, and we answer with our words in church, yes, but more importantly with our actions. After our Baptisms, as the priest signed us with the Sacred Chrism, he said, "We receive this Child into the congregation of Christ's flock; and do sign him with the sign of the Cross; in token that hereafter he shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and manfully to fight under his banner, against sin, the world, and the devil and to continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant unto his life's end." And note, every bit of that is said over girls just as over boys. So that's what we must do to make Christ the King of the world in deed as well as in thought. What have we done to-day to make this so? This week? This month? This very, very trying year? What are these trials manifesting in us? Coming closer to God because we are reminded how we rely only on him? Doing good to our neighbour because so many are in sick, in need, or in anxiety or desperation? The works of God should be made manifest in us.

Let us go back to to-day's Gospel, from the Passion according to St John: Pilate said unto Jesus, Art thou the King of the Jews? Jesus answered him, Sayest thou this thing of thyself, or did others tell it thee of me? Pilate answered, Am I a Jew? Thine own nation and the chief priests have delivered thee unto me: what hast thou done? Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence. Pilate therefore said unto him, Art thou a king then? Jesus answered, Thou sayest that I am a king. To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice.

Pilate had already showed him to the crowd and said, "Behold your king!" They answered, "away with him, crucify him", and "we have no King but Caesar". And Pilate had asked earlier, in jest, "What is truth?"

Pilate asked. Jesus answered. "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice".

If we are of the truth, we hear his voice. If we answer it, we proclaim him as our King.

And what is this Kingdom of his to be like: listen to the Preface that the Celebrant will sing shortly: God, who didst anoint thine only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, with the oil of gladness, to be a Priest for ever and the King of all the world: that, offering himself an unspotted sacrifice of peace upon the altar of the Cross, he might accomplish the mystery of the redemption of mankind: and making all creatures subject to his governance, might deliver up to thine infinite Majesty an eternal and universal kingdom. A kingdom of truth and life: a kingdom of sanctity and grace: a kingdom of justice, love, and peace.

That is his kingdom. We must do all we can to make our world like his Kingdom. We shall fail, but we must try. We must do all we can to make our lives subject to this Kingdom. We shall fail, but we must try. But if we have tried, we shall be subjects of this King in Heaven in that Kingdom which never passes away.