November 26, 2017
The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

Ez 34:11-12, 15-17
1 Cor 15:20-26, 28
Mt 25:31-46

By Joe Serano, O.Praem.

Matthew 25 is one of those texts that cuts to the heart of what it means to be Christian. Indeed, it's the basis for what we call the "works of mercy": feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick and imprisoned. Indeed, today's Gospel passage asserts that this is the "litmus test" for entrance into eternal life. For, "what you did (or did not do) for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did (or did not do) for me." That's about as clear and basic as you can get.

Moreover, this teaching is at the root of the church's commitment to ministering in hospitals, orphanages, schools and homeless shelters. Indeed, it's the biblical ground for so much of the very "praxis" that incarnates a commitment to social justice -- providing these ministries to ALL those in need. To go a step further, it leads believers to the insight and insistence (for example) that "health insurance" is not a privilege but a basic human right.

But lest we be misunderstood, the feast of Christ the KING carries a further teaching. We have to underline that the gospel imperative is not about seeking power or having control. Christians have no desire to coerce others into following the "way of the Lord." Theocracy is a failed experiment, if only because by definition faith is "free" or it is not faith at all.

Before Vatican II, it was not difficult to assert that Catholics did not respect religious liberty. In Italy and Spain in the 1950's, while Protestants were allowed to worship without fear, they were forbidden from having newspapers to proselytize -- because "error has no rights." (It was not an accident that no American Catholic was elected President until John Kennedy won in 1960 — and then only by 118,000 out of 69,000,000 votes cast.) Over time, Catholic theory "developed" and Vatican II's Dignitatis Personae affirmed unequivocally our commitment to religious liberty. Much of this was due to the work of John Courtney Murray, S.J., who argued that "error" does not exist, but "persons" do -- and persons have rights, including the right to search for the truth even if that risks their going astray. No, it's not about power and coercion. Our King reigns by a different set of rules.

Are we then to confine our commitment to "the least of our brothers and sisters" to personal acts of charity? Quite the contrary: today's feast reminds us of our duty to persuade if not coerce, to argue for our values in the public square and most of all to bear witness BY OUR DOING. As a wise teacher once put it, "It's not about practicing what you preach but preaching what you already practice." There is no more powerful instrument for doing our part that the "Kingdom might come" than the testimony of living out the teaching of Matthew 25.
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