

Whenever I think about Jesus; whenever I talk about Him or write about Him or preach about Him.....

Whatever my starting point..... it always seems to come down to the same thing.....

It always comes down to His vulnerability; His acquaintance with grief and pain and rejection.....

And it always comes down to His connection and identification with those who are vulnerable, isolated and rejected.

And today is no different. And why wouldn't it be..... because that is what Jesus was and is..... and will always be.

Our gospel reading this morning points us to this same, incarnate Jesus..... who grasped the incarnation with both hands and who saw that if He would wear the victor's crown, He must first wear the crown of thorns.

So, the gospel this morning points us to the Jesus who walked alongside, and embraced the needy.

It points us to the Jesus who SO identified with the poor, the prisoner, those who were homeless, naked and sick..... that He could say....

When you did it to these you did it to me..... when you left the needs of these people un-met..... you left My needs un-met.

Jesus' story is about 3 groups..... the sheep, the goats and those in need. And it is about the heavenly banquet and who will grace its tables.

The sheep, Jesus tells us will be welcomed at the banquet because they helped those in need; the goats will not..... because they ignored those in need.

So..... which are we..... sheep or goats

Well, I suspect that it's not as straightforward as that..... for I imagine that none of us fit neatly into either group.

The truth is, more likely, that we are all a bit of both.

There are times when we HAVE helped the poor, the homeless, the sick and the needy.....

When we HAVE supported the families of those in prison....

But equally, there are times when we have chosen NOT to help.....excusing ourselves for one reason or another..... and have walked away.

So we may not necessarily have seats reserved for us at the heavenly feast.

But there is another group.....often overlooked in Jesus' story..... who will most certainly be sitting at the table with Jesus.....and with whom Jesus clearly had empathy.

These are those in need..... who recognise their need..... who open themselves up to asking for help.....

And in so doing..... open themselves up to rejection, often on the streets of our cities...

Admitting need is not easy.

Admitting need implies needing help and support..... and it means being prepared to accept help and support.

But we're not too good at that are we?

So often when help is offered we rush to say..... no, it's okay thank you.... I can manage.

I don't want to put you out....

But what we are really saying is.....I don't want to admit that I need help.

Admitting we need help makes us feel vulnerable..... and we don't want to be seen as vulnerable.

Those we see begging on our streets.... Have no choice but to make themselves vulnerable.....

To put themselves in the position of asking for help in the most raw and savage way possible..... and being rejected.

These are the people Jesus would have been alongside..... who He would have been comfortable with..... because he knew what it was to open Himself up to rejection.

So.... How 'alongside' are we? Do we know how to respond to those we see huddled in shop doorways? Or do we feel uncomfortable and walk by?

I recently watched a documentary on homelessness in our towns and cities.

One young man who had been able to find a way out of the homelessness he had found himself in..... was asked what it had been like living on the streets.

He described the constant stream of people..... walking by..... not making any kind of contact..... making him feel invisible.

He said, All those people think I'm scum.

I wanted to shout out..... it's not true.....we don't think you're scum..... I don't think you're scum....

I feel for your situation..... BUT I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO..... I DON'T KNOW HOW TO RESPOND WHEN I SEE YOU HUDDLED THERE.

You tell me that you need money.... So I give you something.....

Then people tell me I'm wrong and I shouldn't do that....

SO WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Some of you may remember the name of Krister Otterson who was, many years ago, the city centre chaplain.

It was he who had an answer to my question.....

If you want to help the homeless, he said, buy the Big Issue..... so I did.

Those in need are not always 'other people.'..... for the likelihood is that at some point in OUR lives we may find ourselves in need.

We may need help after a bereavement or during an illness; when we are worried about our family or our finances..... and when help is given to us Jesus will say to those who helped..... 'In as much as you helped these..... so you also helped Me.'

And so it is, in those moments when we open ourselves up to being helped and supported that we find Christ the King alongside.

For Christ the King whose feast we celebrate today....

Is the King who came to seek and to save the lost....

Who came for the tax-collector beating his breast in repentance..... and not for the self-righteous Pharisee....

Who came for the little children... and the woman excluded from all social contact because of her medical condition....

Who challenged authority and societies norms....

Who was the shepherd to scattered sheep and who shone His light onto dark places.

He is the King who came for those in Syria who need the socks we have brought today...

The baby boxes we have filled..... the clothes we have brought.....

Who came for the babies in Africa who need the hats and blankets we have knitted.....

He is the King who identifies with the hungry and thirsty in our world;

With those who are homeless in our cities; those held in our prisons and those sick in our hospitals....

Who comes for those who know their need of Him.

And He is the King, who wears the victor's crown, who invites us to His table, ..... where we will eat with Him..... and He with us.