



This Sunday marks the end of the Christian year. Next week we will once again begin hearing the stories of Jesus' birth and life, his ministry and teaching, his death and resurrection. Our faith is never static and it is through the listening and engaging with scripture that we hope to gain new insights and new understanding.

Before we start the new Christian Year we celebrate the feast of Christ the King. We remember that Jesus is king of the universe that while earthly kings and governments come and go, Christ reigns as King for all eternity.

A common image for this feast is Jesus risen, ascended and now enthroned in Glory, seated high above on a splendid throne ready to judge all the nations. This is of course a powerful and important image and the image given at the beginning of today's gospel reading but alongside this is an image of Christ as a hidden king. One that is hidden in the hungry and thirsty, the naked, the stranger and the prisoner. One who identifies and has compassion for those who are on the margins of society.

In this parable Jesus picked two very similar animals, sheep and goats. Would our understanding of this story change if he had chosen sheep and wolves? Sheep and goats are very similar in size, Both have wool coats. Their diet is very similar. Even the sounds they make are difficult to distinguish. Of course they are not the same species. Jesus is not choosing between the obviously bad and the obviously good. Each group goes to the place that has already been chosen for them. Jesus does not ask anyone to present their case or argue their cause. He asks no questions nor requests any evidence. But after the sorting he explains the basis of his choice.

They were not judged on whether they have kept the Ten Commandments or any other religious practice. The test was very simple: did they love and show compassion to people in need? The story speaks of very practical and specific actions like giving food and drink, welcoming, visiting and taking care of others. Are you surprised by the criteria for separating the sheep and goats?

With the phrase "You did it to me" Jesus identifies himself with the person in need. Every time we neglect to help a person in need, we neglect Jesus himself. Our worst sins, our most dangerous sins, will be the sins of omission.

Notice that both groups have the same reaction to the king. Neither of them recognise Jesus in the poor and needy. The first group just treated everyone with love, they were following Jesus' teaching. The second group failed to recognise the humanity of others. Perhaps this is as much our challenge as anyone else's in this world today? Can we see the true humanity, the image of God, in those in need? Do we take the time to remind ourselves of the fundamental, basic identity of the poor and the marginalised? Or are we content to talk in generalities that conveniently let us forget that each person is an individual with their own story.

