

Christ the King

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

November, 22, 2020

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Psalm 95:1-7a

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46

Father David Beresford

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have spent most of my life in seaside towns and cities with a changing, cosmopolitan population. Especially during the summer, these towns come alive with an influx of visitors. Most are holiday makers, but there was another category of visitors who came to enjoy the sunshine, and this was the homeless. Many were alcoholics, who by day rambled the streets and promenades or sat in the parks. At night they dosed down in parks, shop doorways or in the homeless shelters which were provided by churches or the township.

I served a curacy in a seaside town, like the one I have just described, and another curacy in a very different setting: a small village benefice up country, a long way from the sea and actually a long way from anywhere. The contrast between seaside town and country village couldn't have been starker. In the country village there was but one bus service a day. There were no shops. There used to be a restaurant, but that closed years ago and the restaurant was now someone's living room. At night, without street lights, the village was eerily dark and quiet.

As you can imagine, this wasn't the kind of place where much happened. It was like the village in *Midsomer Murders*, without the murders. The only visitors to the village were usually family and friends. It came as a surprise therefore, one day, to receive a knock at the door. Who could it be? I opened the door to a man and a dog. The man's name was John and his companion - a large white haired dog - was called Bobby. John was what we politely referred to as a "gentleman of the road". The old fashioned term would be "hobo." He asked me if I had any food, to which I replied "yes".

I had met people like John before, in the seaside town of Brighton, where I used to live. John was one of those homeless people I talked about earlier, although he didn't appear to have a drinking problem. It was highly unusual to find people like John outside of urban areas, because that's where you could make the most money from begging. When I asked John how he got to our village, he replied that he and Bobby the dog had walked 17 miles.

As it was late in the day and there was nowhere else for John to go, I unlocked the church and told him to wait there. I went back to the vicarage to make his food and fetch a comforter and pillow so he could sleep in the church overnight. In fact, John spent the next seven nights sleeping in the church. During that week I got to know him a little better. He had once held down a good job, as a journalist, but for various reasons (which I won't go into now) he had to give it up. John was a bit of a loner; a bit of an oddball. Out in the sticks, he could enjoy the quiet of the countryside and sleep in the church overnight.

In the course of his time with us, many in the congregation got to know John. He behaved well most of the time: he never swore in front of women or the curate. When his dog had diarrhea in the church, John carefully cleaned up the mess. It was a novelty for most of us to

have John there. After a week, however, it started to feel as though he was taking advantage of us. I'm not sure if it was right to think in this way. At one point he said he wanted to see his sister who lived in Littlehampton about 15 miles away. I readily agreed to drive him there, secretly hoping that he would not trouble us again. However, a week later he was back, sleeping in the church once more.

Eventually he had his marching orders from the Rector - perhaps rightly. Otherwise I think he may have become accustomed to having someone providing for him all the time. So John left and, soon after, so did I, to be a Rector in another town. Where did he go? I expect he sought out another church. He once told me he went from one vicarage to another and found out which ones would give him food and a place to sleep.

Now, I happen to be one of those people who think things happen for a reason, and I believe that there was a reason why John and Bobby the dog came to our quiet parish. After all the talk of loving your neighbor and being kind to the stranger, what was I going to do when the stranger actually turned up? I wanted to do the right thing as a Christian. I asked myself whether I could see the face of Jesus Christ in John? Listen again to what our Lord says,

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

The more I talked to him, the more I could see he was not so very different from me, and there, but for the grace of God, I could have gone. I realized that we were indeed brothers in Christ. I began to wish the best for him and would pray for him every day, and I asked other people to pray for him too. In the parish he became a regular topic of conversation. Of course there were some who didn't care for him being around, but I'm glad to say they were in a minority.

Looking back, he really was a blessing for our church, for in our own small way we were able to fulfill the words of scripture:

“...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

These words form part of the reading from this morning's Gospel which are a description of the Last Judgement; the only description we have, by the way, in any of the Gospels. We are reminded that Christ is present in people like John - people who call us beyond our own concerns to see and serve Christ in them. And in order to do so, we must first learn to see as Jesus sees and to love as he loves. For we are called to love people like John, even if they are a little odd and strange.

Listen to these words by St Teresa of Kolkata, who reminds us that at the end of life,

“...we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, [or] how many great things we have done. [We will be judged on how we treated those who were hungry, naked and homeless]... Hungry not only for bread—but hungry for love; naked not only for clothing—but naked of human dignity and respect;

homeless not only for want of a room—but homeless because of rejection. This, [she says], is Christ in distressing disguise.”

And, I would add, beneath the disguise is Christ robed in majesty, a King who reigns supreme in love over us and among us. On the feast of Christ the King we remember and worship the King who was the suffering servant, rejected by men, beaten and crucified and killed because of *our* wickedness, yet who rose again to take his place at the right hand of God, from where he now reaches out to those on the margins of life: the outcasts from society, the poor, the hungry, the needy, the troubled and the lonely. He reaches out in love, and *he is them* - our king identifies himself with the poor and forsaken, and shares their suffering and feeling of abandonment. He is able to speak from the throne of grace and from the depths of despair because he is no stranger to either.

Listen carefully to the words of our King and take them to heart.

“Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...”

This kingdom is one which will reign for ever. It is not like an earthly kingdom, where the king is remote from his subjects. In the heavenly kingdom, the king is also our brother. This kingdom is one built on relationships, and on the closeness of God to us. To enter the kingdom, we must follow Jesus. We must love as he loved and not count the cost. We must love generously, even to those who are strange, difficult or different. To do this, we must ask God, the ruler of our hearts, to grant us wisdom to see him, courage to feed him, and a heart to care for him, when he comes to us as a stranger, hungry, naked and homeless.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Father David Beresford