

Homily for the Feast of Christ the King

A homily preached in the Chapel of the Resurrection, Pusey House, Oxford, at the High Mass on Sunday, 26 November 2023 (The Feast of Christ the King), by The Reverend Fergus Butler-Gallie, Vicar-Designate of St Mary's and All Saints', Charlbury

I shall take as my text this morning the fifth verse of the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to St John.

When Jesus then lifted up his eyes, and saw a great company come unto him, he saith unto Philip, Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

IT was on the Wednesday before the feast of Christ the King when, to a courtyard, dusty and neglected, in an unhappy corner of Mexico City, they led Miguel Pro. He was there to die. His crime being the profession of Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, as his Lord and Saviour. The soldiers took him to the far end of the yard and put him against the wall.

He refused a blindfold and instead looked his persecutors directly in the eye, and, with his final breath proclaimed 'Viva, Cristo Rey'. Long live Christ the King.

The entire thing was photographed. President Calles, the hand of tolerant, secular liberalism in that nation, expected the gaze of Pro, just as he was about to die, to strike fear into the hearts of those who would dare defy him and continue to profess the faith. It had the opposite effect. The gaze of Pro struck fear into the hearts of those who sought to suppress the faith of the Living God. Those words 'Long Live Christ the King' echoed across the nation, inspired and sustained. They were words of faith - deep faith - in the good purposes of God, in the inevitable rule of Christ - in the midst of the very darkest of days.

What has this to do with Oxford? Surely the political facts of Mexico nearly a century ago have nothing to do with this little acre today. And besides, what does this Spanish cry have to do with our English religion? Fr George will tell you that, during my brief stint on the lowest echelons of Greater Chapter, mine was the voice raised loudest against

any continental infringement or influence upon the practices of the Church by God and Law established here. We are here for Stir-Up Sunday, the next before Advent, that glorious example of Cranmer's prose as we enter the new Church year: surely that, as it is breathed in transepts and chancels across this land, is a very long way from the courtyard in Mexico City and the guttural cry of 'Viva Cristo Rey'?

And yet, for all that I hold the idea that there are unique gifts of our Church to be true, there is much - very much - that unites the two. First and foremost, Christ is King of all or of none. As St Paul instructs us, He is 'the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence': all things, not some things, not things according to the delineations we make on earth. And the consequence of that is that it is not possible for his Church - for us, His body here in earth - to shed our links, our essential oneness with the other members of the body. We might, rightly, protect our ways, our particular gifts given by God to the Church in this place: but we cannot say that this Church exists entirely of itself. We are bound by the very sinews of Christ's body.

Secondly, to maintain faith in Christ is to be innately conscious of political facts - be they of Mexico then or Britain now. We maintain that, as in the words of Holy Scripture, Christ 'shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.' If we are His body, then the practicalities of that concern us. They concern us in the Church and in the polis: and, as Babylon seems to triumph in both, the execution of judgement and justice becomes an ever more crucial aspect of what it means to be 'stirred up'.

Finally, there is an inherent link between the piercing cry of Viva Cristo Rey and the Collect we pray today. It comes in the essence of what it is to be stirred up, and how it is that we might be so stirred. It comes from the fact that the heart of His Kingship manifests itself in our lives and in the life of the Church. We are called to be stirred by His Kingship - but how might we do so? Well, let us return to the Gospel: Christ seeks to feed us, seeks to stir us, but before he does so, he seeks to look at us, to raise up His eyes, and to meet our gaze. Miguel Pro followed his Saviour in many ways: but perhaps the most important way was in that he knew the power of looking people in the eye.

Our challenge is to allow Christ to lift up His eyes and look us in the eye. For when He does so, nothing can be the same. Such is the power of Christ's gaze, that it necessarily changes those on whom it falls. The Holy Gospel we have heard makes that clear: Christ's gaze is the

precursor to Christ's sustenance, to Christ's grace. So it is that when we allow our hearts to be seen by Him, and so in being seen to be changed, our wills might be stirred up and, having been stirred up, that they - that we - might bring forth fruit.

Yet, yet, this isn't easy. Looking Christ as King in the eye is a terrifying thing. The very angels, the seraphim and cherubim cast their eyes down for fear of meeting His gaze. Who are we to look on him?

Well, there is, at the heart of His kingship, a truth that makes meeting the eye of this King possible. His is that kingship of Melchizedek, which runs from before we are and after we shall be, and yet which, by Him, we might communicate with here and now. We are here in this very place to make Communion with Him - to celebrate that aspect of His kingship which gives sustenance to our souls, which enables them to be stirred up, and to bring forth, we pray, good works, that aspect of His kingship is this: that this is a king who gives wholly of Himself. His power is reliant on nobody else, for He is almighty. Yet He allows that power to flow from Him in the form of love. In short, we can look on Him because He first looks on us, if we will let him, and he looks on us in love.

This aspect of His kingship, a wholly sufficient self-sacrifice, means that the answer to the question He asks, when He lifts up His eyes, 'Whence shall we buy bread that these may eat?', is already - and always was - present. He Himself is that bread, and because of His full and sufficient sacrifice made for me and for each of you and for all who would dare meet the gaze of His lifted-up eye - there is no need for us to buy this bread, for it is already bought. That which sustains us takes its form as His love, is bought by love, and calls us to be stirred up to love as well.

And here is the abiding truth of Christ's kingship, here is the abiding truth of Grace! And here, here is what makes it so fearful to look Christ as King in the eye. Because at the last He looks us in the eye and does so with love. Terrifying love. Why so? Well, it is a love that sees us as we really are. That is why we fear to look Christ in the eye, not because He is an embodiment of wrath, but He is an embodiment of love - much scarier. This is at the heart of what it is to be seen by Christ: to be seen is to be fully and truly known, and yet, despite all that means for the depths of our souls, for our failures and secret hidden thoughts, it still means, by Christ, to be loved.

Take courage then, to meet Christ and allow Him to lift up His eyes to look upon you. He comes to us now under the form of Himself in the

Most Blessed Sacrament; as we look upon that, allow Him to look upon you, to know you in the very depths of your soul. Then, having been looked upon and truly known, come to be fed, and to be seen once more, reflected in the glory of his redeemed humanity, come and be seen and, by being so seen, come and be loved, by the one who is King of all. If that does not stir us up, then what will?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.