

Homily for Mass at Birmingham University Catholic Chaplaincy

Today the Catholic Church throughout the world celebrates one of the great solemnities of the Lord, the Feast of Christ the King. The Church in England and Wales has also chosen this day to celebrate Youth Day, and it is an honour that I have been invited to be with you, the Catholic students of Birmingham University, on this doubly important day.

A first impression about this feast of Christ the King could be that it is an anachronism, a reference to something that is out-of-date and remote to our lives in the 21st century. The age of monarchy is long gone, replaced by democratic government. Though we have a constitutional monarchy in this country, the monarch's role has been reduced to a ceremonial role, with all political and legislative power concentrated in Parliament.

But even though the age of human Kings has passed into history, the image of Christ the King still has the power to inspire and motivate us.

In Dachau Concentration Camp there is a memorial that was built to honour the memory of the 200,000 prisoners imprisoned there during the Nazis' reign of terror. This memorial is called the Chapel of the Mortal Agony of Christ, and it contains two powerful works of art.

The first is a piece of black metal work suspended above the camp – an enormous crown of thorns. The second is a sculpture of Jesus wearing the infamous camp uniform of striped jacket and trousers. And on his head he also wears a crown of thorns.

To my mind these two pieces of art, set in the context of Dachau Concentration Camp, reveal the true nature of Jesus' kingship, and the reason why Christ the King remains an important symbol for everyone here today.

What does the Crown of Thorns symbolise? To understand this we have to turn to what Holy Scripture tells us. In today's reading from the Gospel of St John we hear the dialogue between Pontius Pilate and Jesus, between human power and divine power.

Pilate is the Prefect of the Roman Province of Judaea, and is the representative of Caesar, the king of the Roman Empire. Under questioning from this agent of worldly power Jesus reveals part of his true identity, He is a King, but his kingdom is not of this world.

Though the peasants, prostitutes and outcasts of Galilee could glimpse the kingship and power of Jesus, those associated with worldly power either saw him as a perplexing enigma, a dangerous subversive or a misguided fool.

The Crown of Thorns represents worldly power's mockery of Jesus 'the fool'. It also represents the soldier's judgement that Jesus was sub-human, a thing with no rights

over which they had the power of life and death. To worldly power the Crown of Thorns is the sign of Jesus' powerlessness and weakness.

But from the Christian perspective – which is God's perspective – the Crown of Thorns represents the mystery of God's apparent powerlessness. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it:

'God can sometimes seem to be absent and incapable of stopping evil. But in the most mysterious way God the Father has revealed his almighty power in the voluntary humiliation and Resurrection of his Son, by which he conquered evil. Christ crucified is thus "the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men".' (CCC, 272).

From this perspective, the Crown of Thorns represents the love and transforming power of God appearing under the guise of weakness and humiliation.

The full force of the Roman Empire came down and appeared to crush, humiliate and kill Jesus on the Cross, but within less than 300 years the Roman Emperor would be a Christian, and the Church – the sacrament of the Kingdom of God – would have spread throughout the Empire.

In the 20th century, both Nazism and Soviet and Maoist Communism have sought to oppress and destroy the Church, but the Crown of Thorns has survived and outlasted both the Swastika and the Hammer and Sickle.

Now it is our turn to take the Crown of Thorns as our symbol of resistance to worldly power. Some of the worst expressions of this harmful worldly power we face are shown in the treatment of the weakest members of our society – the unborn, the old, the sick and disabled.

Since the passing of Abortion Act in 1967 the Church's upholding of morality in this country has been defeated time and time again. This country has rejected the right to life of unborn human beings; it has rejected the rights of embryonic human beings to be protected from experiments; it has rejected the rights of children to be brought up in heterosexual marriages, and, now it is in the process of gradually rejecting the rights of the sick, disabled and mentally ill to life.

Before this onslaught against the dignity and rights of human beings, the Church appears to be powerless and weak. We are mocked by many politicians, journalists, and scientists as misguided, superstitious, fools and dangerous fundamentalists.

Therefore, my advice to you, as Catholic students, during these times is to remember the truth and power of Jesus' Crown of Thorns. It is the sign of our resistance to all worldly power that seeks to oppress, that seeks to reduce human beings to being sub-human, to be things with no rights over which they had the power of life and death.

Through our allegiance to the Crown of Thorns we announce to the world that Jesus' love for the vulnerable reigns in our minds and hearts; that through our

powerlessness and weakness – accepted in faith – God’s almighty power will work through us to transform the world.

Amen.