

## Feast of Christ the King

Here we stand on this feast of Christ the King at the gate of the year. Behind us lie the last twelve months with all that has happened to us personally and communally during that time. Before us stands a new liturgical year, which like virgin snow is as yet untrodden. Maybe we approach it with some trepidation, some apprehension of what lies ahead. If so, we may take heart from the words of the American writer, M. Louise Haskins: <sup>1</sup>*I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown." And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."*

*Put your hand into the hand of God*, but the first step surely has to be recognising that hand when it is extended to us. And that is the wonder of today's Gospel. Three crucified men hang, dying in the midst of a horror and brutality that is almost past our comprehension. One joins the bystanders in their mockery of Jesus, railing at him: <sup>2</sup>*Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us*. The other does not ask the question, there is no need. He simply recognises Truth, recognises Jesus' kingship, which shines through the suffering, the humiliation, the desolation of the Cross: *Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power*.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by King George VI in his Christmas broadcast of 1939 at the outbreak of war.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 23.39-43

For from Jesus' outstretched hand, nailed to the Cross, he has received the grace to recognise, to acknowledge and so can put his hand into the hand of God.

*When you come into your kingly power:* that is a very powerful image. It was that image that condemned Jesus to death. For the high priest had asked him: <sup>3</sup>*Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?* And Jesus had replied: *I am; and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven* and the high priest had torn his mantle crying: *you have heard his blasphemy.* For such imagery echoed back to the <sup>4</sup>vision of Ezekiel on the banks of the river Chebar, a vision of God, coming with the clouds of heaven. It was the same vision that <sup>5</sup>Stephen, the first Christian martyr, described. It is why he was stoned to death: *Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.*

*Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power.* Perhaps the dying thief was looking to a future time, perhaps he was expressing his faith, his hope, the dearest hope of his heart, underneath all the acknowledged short fall of his earthly life. But the response must have shaken him to his core: *Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.* Not tomorrow, not in some distant future, but

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 14.61-63

<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel 1.4-28

<sup>5</sup> Acts 7. 54-58

today you will be with me in Paradise: in God's orchard, God's garden, the place where God walks <sup>6</sup>*in the cool of the day*, inviting humankind into an eternal dialogue of love. And there is more: for Jesus didn't say: today you will be in Paradise. No, his invitation is much more personal: *Truly I say to you, today you will be **with me** in Paradise*. And here we have the heart of the Gospel, for to be in Paradise is to be with Jesus. Jesus is the meeting place between heaven and earth. In Jesus humankind has ascended to heaven into the heart of the Blessed Trinity and, wonder of wonders, it is this same Jesus, who invites each of us, as he invited the dying thief, to be with him in Paradise: to sit at his table, to share in his kingdom. And this is not some hoped-for final outcome, some vague possibility, if we can just get through the earthly bit. No, it is an invitation for the present moment, for today, for now. Where Jesus is, there is Paradise, where Jesus is, there God reigns. And where is Jesus? <sup>7</sup>*Very near to us*, <sup>8</sup>*standing at the door knocking*, <sup>9</sup>*stretching out his arms between heaven and earth*, <sup>10</sup>*accompanying us all along the way we travel*, inviting our recognition, in the words of Ralph Sherwin, the first English martyr of the Reformation: <sup>11</sup>*today, rather than tomorrow*.

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 3.8-9

<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 30.14

<sup>8</sup> Revelation 3.20

<sup>9</sup> Mass of Reconciliation I

<sup>10</sup> Deuteronomy 1.31

<sup>11</sup> Archives of the Venerable English College in Rome.