

**Homily 34th Sunday of the Year (B) Sunday 22nd November, 2009.
Solemnity of Christ the King.**

Mass Readings: Daniel 7:13-14; Apocalypse 1:5-8; John 18:33-37.

There was once a poor peasant family that had worked for years scrimping and saving to buy a piece of land. Finally the day came, and they took possession of it. The mother and her six children gathered in the two-room shack that was their house while the father walked the length and breadth of the land, marking out its boundaries. They were all overjoyed. They had waited years for this moment. As the man walked around the land he noticed something sticking out from under a bush. He bent down and pulled it out. It was a figure of the crucified Jesus, but only the torso – without arms or legs. Obviously it had been in the ground a long time. He took it back to the house and laid it on the kitchen table. The family all stood around and looked at it. What should they do with it? Should they re-bury it, take it to the priest – what? They felt they couldn't just throw it away. The face was perfect, only the limbs were gone.

Finally the youngest said: "I have an idea."

"What?" they all replied.

"Why don't we hang it on the wall and put a sign underneath it."

"What would you put on the sign?"

"We could put – I have no arms or hands or legs or feet now – why don't you lend me yours?" Why don't you lend me yours.....? He gives Himself to me, can I give myself to Him?

Just now the constellation Orion is clearly visible in the night sky. Orion is shaped like an 'H' with three stars in a line at the centre, known as Orion's belt. The star in the bottom right is Rigel. Travelling at 186,000 miles a second, light takes 900 years to reach the Earth from Rigel. If you can see it tonight, the light that you see left Rigel during the reign of William the Conqueror. The star in the top left is Betelgeuse. Betelgeuse is tiny and slightly reddish in colour. It's very far away, because in fact it is so big that our sun, big as that is, can fit inside Betelgeuse 64,000,000 times. If Betelgeuse was where our sun is now its diameter would extend beyond Mars. It's massive, but you and I see it as tiny, like a pinhead. These distances are utterly beyond our comprehension. Yet the One who cast them on their way is closer to you than your arms or legs. He gives Himself to me.

Last week I attended a meeting of our Franciscan province in the UK. I travelled to and from London by Megabus – over twelve hours each way, believe me that's long! But our universe is mind-boggling in its sheer immensity. A greater mystery, a more wonderful mystery, a more totally captivating mystery is that the

One who created it all is closer to you than your hands and feet, more intimate than your heartbeat. When my bus eventually reached Victoria station I got the tube to Chigwell in Essex. While on the tube I looked at all these people and I suddenly felt God's proximity in each person - uniquely. He is all around us – His hands, His feet, His face, His eyes. I could give Him arms and legs on the tube. But to many it's totally incomprehensible, like the remoteness of the distant stars. So many people we see each week, chat to at work, accompany on the train, the bus, stand behind in the supermarket, speak to over the phone, read about in the newspaper, see on TV, have no comprehension whatsoever of the proximity of God. His proximity is as incomprehensible to them as is the remoteness of Orion's belt. Many just see themselves as random and accidental. No distance in the universe is further from the truth than that.

It is to explain and reveal the intimacy of God and make it the central force in our lives that Jesus came. *"I was born for this, I came into the world for this, to bear witness to the truth."* What truth? That our God, who created everything, is perpetually making a gift of Himself to each of us in an utterly unique way. He is both totally other than us and yet totally intimate to us. God has given us many things – little things like snails, worms, frogs and flowers. He has given magnificent things like wind, oceans, and mountains. He has given us wonderful people to love and be loved by. He has given us mysterious things like sorrow, pain, growth, death, and joy. He has given us huge far away things like Betelgeuse. But most importantly He has given us Himself, so that in all those other gifts He will be accessible. *"Praised are you Lord by our brother, the sun, who is great and magnificent and lights up the day; he reminds us of you. Praised are you Lord by our sister the moon, and the stars whom you have set clearly and beautifully in the heavens."* Everything is touched by Him. Everywhere is a meeting place with Him. Everything, moment by moment is brought into being by Him, for the simple reason that if it wasn't it simply wouldn't exist.

So all the great and tiny experiences we have daily are places where God is truly present, where we can meet Him. He is so near, so involved, so given to each one of us. I felt this on the tube. This is the truth to which the life of Jesus bears witness. *"To have seen me is to have seen the Father."* But this is as far away from so many people as the distant galaxies. He needs us as His witnesses. Pilate stared Jesus in the face and then asked: "What is truth?" He looked truth in the eyes, yet asked the question – so near yet so far. This is our current dilemma. So near, yet so far.

This proximity of God can also be painful because many people are hurting, and angry, and lost, and any mention of, or reference to, a loving God only angers them more. The truth of God's proximity, of which Jesus spoke, was rejected,

and he was despised. Jesus Christ is the faithful witness, but He was hated. If we wish to share in Jesus' ministry of bearing witness with Him to the proximity of God then we will be welcomed by some, but hated by others.

I always try and travel in the habit. The habit points to God. When I arrived at Chigwell station I had to walk to the convent for the meeting along a path beside a major road. It had been raining hard all night, and in places there were large puddles extending out into the road. There were some people in front of me and the drivers all had a clear view, so any on-coming cars went round the lake-sized puddles to keep the pedestrians dry. I got to the centre of this huge puddle, the others having gone on ahead of me, and I saw a large car coming. I assumed it would skirt the puddle but the driver, seeing me, accelerated and drove right into it just when I was at its widest point. I was completely soaked, literally to the skin. It was a wonderful gift of a moment. Earlier, on the tube, I had felt a sense of God's proximity. Yet that comes at a price. "*Everyone will hate you because you belong to me.*" At that moment I felt a special closeness to Jesus - what an honour. This moment was a special gift because it is precisely in moments like this that I can give limbs and a face and a witness to Christ by how I respond. Teachers can clarify a truth – witnesses establish it, make it concrete, visible, touchable.

How do I give a heart and limbs to Christ? How can I bear witness to the proximity of God? We give Him our legs and our feet when we stay with what hurts us rather than run away, and when we walk to those in need. We give Him our arms when we embrace what ridicules and scorns us rather than wave them angrily in retaliation, and when we support the weak and poor. We give Him our hands when we bless those who strike out at us rather than strike back in anger. We give Him our tongues when we forgive and ask for forgiveness rather than curse back in return. We give Him our ears when we listen to His voice speaking of peace and reconciliation within us rather than the voices within ourselves that seek only revenge. I give Him my heart when I love others in the face of rejection.

Soon we will sing those delightful words – "*Lo, within a manger lies He who built the starry skies.*" Lo within my life, my heart, my day lies He who created me, out of nothing – out of love. This is true of everyone. May we always bear witness to this truth, and carry the cost of it. For we too came into the world for this.