

## Last Things

Today we celebrate the last Sunday of the liturgical year, fittingly the feast of Christ the King. For in the end, it is indeed Christ whom we aspire to govern our lives. Not that we are always the most loyal of subjects. We all have areas in our lives where Christ does not hold undisputed sway. Areas of our lives where other forces are also at work. But we do seek to extend Christ's reign in our lives, for we do hear in the call of Christ a call to our own better selves.

Why else do we come here Sunday after Sunday? Why do we come to hear over and over again the same old stories from the life of Jesus? Why do we come to repeat over and over again, the same old ritual, standing, sitting, kneeling, singing prayers, listening to prayers, reciting prayers all in the same order week after week. Why do we do it?

Why? Because we have found that it is through this weekly ritual that we can reconnect with our better selves. Through this ritual we can quiet down, take a breath and get back in touch with what lies in the deepest part of us, in the very ground of our soul. There we find the object of our dearest longing, the presence of a love beyond words, an embrace that transcends our very humanity, the presence of that very Christ whose words and deeds we listen to and ponder and resolve again and again, week after week, to incarnate once more in our own lives.

A Lutheran mystic, Jacob Boehme, once asked what the difference was between heaven and hell, between God's love and God's wrath. He answered that in God they are the same, the difference rather lies with us. God seeks to embrace us, to take us out of our current conflicted, harried selves and draw us down into himself. For those for whom losing themselves in God is the object of their own deepest longing, they have literally died and gone to heaven. But for those for whom the death of their own ego represents the destruction of everything they hold most dear, it is hell itself.

Now most of us lie in between. Our better selves long for God, but we still cling to things less than divine. For us, God's embrace may be welcome, but death still carries its sting. For us, theologians have created a third category, between heaven and hell— heaven's lobby so to speak, where we still need to take off our coats, boots and gloves, before we can enter into the banquet hall.

Another mystic, my pal Meister Eckhart, once asked what burns in hell. His answer was nothing. For God is being itself, pure and simple. And thus whatever is not God, insofar as it is

not God, is ultimately nothing. He compares our being embraced by God to our picking up a white hot iron bar with our bare hands. Why does our hand burn? Only because it is not itself white hot. So too when God picks embraces us, what burns is all about us that is not yet like God. All that nothingness in our souls must burn away, that we might catch fire and become one with the roaring fire that is God's love.

Isaiah begins in today's first reading: "The Lord God opens my ear that I may hear, and I have not rebelled. I have not turned back." May we follow Isaiah, that when we behold Jesus we may see more of God's love than of God's wrath, and may the nothingness to which we still cling finally burn away, that we too might glow bright and warm for all still in the cold and dark.