

“King of Compassion”
Homily of November 21, 2004
by Father Jim McGee

In today’s gospel, Luke takes us back to Calvary to that moment of seeming failure and humiliation, to three men hanging on their individual crosses. And to the good thief Jesus said, “Amen I say to you, this day you will be with me in Paradise.” Now, I’m not sure how you reacted when you started hearing me proclaim the words of the gospel today. Here we’ve gathered with banners and trumpets and singing to celebrate the honor and the glory of God. And here we have the scene of this crucifixion on Calvary. But Luke, the gospel writer, proclaims Jesus as king just the way he has pictured Him all throughout his gospel, the gospel that we have been hearing almost every Sunday throughout this past year, a Jesus always welcoming, welcoming to the outcast, to the neglected, to the forgotten one, even the notorious sinner. Jesus Christ is King. Jesus Christ is King because He did not hesitate to show us with His own life that the path to ultimate freedom, the path to lasting peace is a life of compassion.

I think many of you here would remember President Jimmy Carter. Jimmy Carter had not a very successful presidency. Jimmy Carter became President in a time when the economy was on a downward slide and aggravated all the more by the gas and oil shortage. Some of us (You may be needing to be my age or older, but some younger.) may remember lining up in gas stations to get gas, lining up and going on odd or even days, depending on your license plate. And Jimmy Carter had a difficult presidency because we had that horrific situation of the American hostages kept in Iran. But we have come to know Jimmy Carter as a remarkable, remarkable man. We herald him for the great work he has done on his own in creating the program of building homes for the poor and in his avid promotion of what we know as Habitat for Humanity throughout the world, in his service in going to foreign countries after his presidency to help insure that elections in societies that have known oppression and tyranny, that the elections might actually happen as free elections.

As you know, Jimmy Carter is a Christian and he takes his faith very, very seriously. Shortly after Jimmy Carter had taken over the office as President, there was another famous leader who had preceded him as vice-president and who had died shortly after Jimmy Carter moved into the White House. His name was Hubert H. Humphrey, Hubert Humphrey. Well, there was a large memorial service, as you can imagine, upon his death, and there were hundreds and hundreds of people who had gathered there, and among those guests was a man by the name of President Richard Nixon. Now, this memorial service was held not long after Richard Nixon was forced to resign in disgrace because of the Watergate Scandal, and it was still fresh, very much fresh in people’s minds. So, at the time of the memorial service, people mixed freely, greeting people as old friends. But there in the corner, shunned, isolated, was the former president, Richard Nixon. It was then that something

wonderful happened. Newly elected president Jimmy Carter walked into the room, glanced around the crowd and saw Dick Nixon standing in the corner and walked directly through the crowd, and with that big-toothed grin of a smile that he could wear, extended his hand and said to him words that stunned the people that were gathered there. He said, "Welcome back, Mr. President. Welcome back home again." That's it. That's it, embracing the sinner, a time of fulfillment, a small, simple gospel deed that announces the kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus' embrace of the good thief, Jimmy Carter's gesture to Richard Nixon, reminds us that the royalty and the glory that we celebrate with the kingship of Jesus is not one that comes from political or social power, but from an eternally welcoming presence, a welcoming embrace even to the notorious sinner.

How shall you or I, how shall we witness to the presence of Christ's kingdom as a present reality, not just as merely a promise of life after death? How, in our world, can we en flesh Jesus' words to the good thief, "Today, you will be with me in paradise?" Here at Christ the King we have certainly seen abundant fruits of our labor and the blessings of God molding our parish community into a most welcoming and generous parish community. Your generosity as a community and as individuals in your time that you share, in the talent that you share, in the treasure that you share, in your offering of prayer, in your witness towards so many needs within our community and far beyond makes Christ the King Parish Community known far and wide. You, you have been a living testimony of our Christian belief that one finds purpose and meaning and a deeper sense of belonging in life through service to and with others. Your profound concern for the least protected in our society, the infirm, the ill, and the dying, the unborn, the unemployed and the underemployed, the immigrant, the homeless, the poor, your profound concern for the least members of our society is a strong beacon of hope for our world and for our church. Your welcoming presence to strangers and to visitors as they come to the threshold of our doors has caused many to choose to become members of this community precisely because of our welcome and our vibrant service. And your welcome and your instinctive forgiveness, your instinctive forgiveness to parish staff who have struggled with their own shortcomings and sin, time and time again. Yes, we have much to celebrate here on this feast of Christ the King, that we are making God's kingdom visible here on this earth. I had seen it so often in my time last decade when I was here ministering. And I am wonderfully awed to see it upon my return! As the hymn goes, "How can I keep from singing?"... How can I keep from singing in gratitude for God working through us?

And there is another point about the Kingdom of God. It has to do with a story I remember from the life of Mahatma Gandhi. (I hope you remember that name, along with Jimmy Carter's.) Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian, the Hindu, leader of his people, who through his non-violence, led a non-violent revolution that got freedom for his Indian people, got the British Empire to finally cede governance and the resources of the land of India to their own people. One time, Mahatma Gandhi was with a couple of his colleagues and his friends and they were running to catch a train, literally running to catch a train, got to the station just as the train was pulling out. Mahatma Gandhi and his colleagues run and they get on the train, literally running and jumping from the walkway onto the steps to take them up into the train. As Mahatma Gandhi did so, his shoe slipped off and down into the track. Calmly, and suddenly, Mahatma Gandhi takes off his other shoe and he flings it out the door. He tries to get it as close to the other shoe as he could. One of his friends turns to him and asks him why

he did such a thing. And Ghandi just smiles and said, "The poor man who finds the shoe lying on the track will now have a pair he can use. And everyone with two shoes on their feet knew that the shoeless man was testifying to the truth. They were subject to their pride and their immediate comfort. He was subject to the rule of compassion, both in the present and for those who would benefit to come.

As we conclude our liturgical year from where we began, focused on the compassionate God, found in Luke, we are invited to renew our own commitment to imitating Jesus for the benefit of those in need now and for those generations to come. As individuals, as families, as a parish community, in our workplaces, in our church, in our schools, as citizens of this nation blessed with plentitude and opportunity how do you and I, how do we embrace the less talented, the lost sheep, the prodigal son, the supposed good-for-nothing in our families, our work situations, our friendships? When we gather, at a team meeting at work, when we gather as a ministry in the parish, when we gather as a family, do we consciously seek the opinions of others from outside our inner circle, making sure that we ask everyone there, everyone who will be affected by the decision, what their opinion is before the decision is made? Do we initiate welcome, initiate welcome to the strangers we encounter in whatever circles we travel? What are the needs? Who are the people that we as a parish have forgotten in our ministries? Do we include the benefit of others in our decision-making? Do we seek the common good, aware of the long-term consequences, seeking long-term benefits? You and I know that path of compassion is a difficult one.

As Christians we often go against the grain, counter to the culture, whether it exists in our families, our work scenarios, in our church, or in our nation. But we believe, we believe that compassion will be the ultimate wisdom and victor, for Jesus promises us two things if we follow His example. Your life will have meaning and you are going to live forever.... (If you get a better offer, take it!) "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise."