

Wrestling with the Word—2

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by Fergus Kerr, O.P.

The Homily

Today we are celebrating the feast of Christ the King. It's the last Sunday in the liturgical year: next Sunday is the first Sunday in Advent, when we begin to relive liturgically the whole mystery of the meaning of life as we apprehend it, once again from the beginning, with the birth of Mary's child at Bethlehem.

The liturgical year now ends with the feast of Christ the King. This is a feast introduced by Pope Pius XI in 1925. What he was doing then was simply to sanction and ratify a movement which started about 1870 in the town of Paray-le-Monial in France, a movement called *La Société du Règne Social de Jésus-Christ*, the founders of which seem mostly to have been aristocrats and merchants. The idea behind it seems to have been to suggest that the power of Christ, the sovereignty of God, was not just in our hearts, purely inward and spiritual, but that it made some visible difference to society. After all, 1870 was not a very happy time for the Church; the pope had finally lost control of the city of Rome and withdrawn into the Vatican. The new secular state had just offered him a pension and declared his basilicas and palaces extra-territorial and therefore outside the jurisdiction of the government. Pius IX refused to accept these terms and it was not until 1929 that Pius XI signed a treaty with Mussolini's government which ran on these lines. In the climate of 1870 it must have seemed natural enough to compensate for the pope's loss of temporal power by propagating the idea that Christ's sovereignty is more than merely spiritual and interior—that it is also social and political.

What that means for us, a hundred years later and in a very different situation, we may see, I think, by looking a bit more closely at today's reading (Luke 19, 28-44). It's the story of how Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem on a pony at the head of a procession of his disciples. The episode begins on a hill about a mile outside the town, on a spot where the prophet Zechariah had promised that God would one day rest. What Jesus wanted to do, I suggest, was to organize a demonstration. He seems to have decided to enter the holy city in a way that would show—demonstrate—that he was the messiah, the messiah prophesied by Zechariah. Jesus planned a demonstration to show that he was claiming to be the saviour, the deliverer, the liberator, but not the liberator his contemporaries were expecting. He wasn't going to appear as the warrior, the military hero, the political figure, that people were hoping for, who would liberate Israel from the yoke of imperial Rome. Jesus came riding on a donkey. We are given a fairly detailed account of the procession, of how his friends and disciples took off some of their clothes and piled

them on the donkey's back to make a saddle for him, to caparison the donkey like a king's horse. And when the donkey began to move, with Jesus on its back, they took off more of their clothes and began throwing them down on the road for the donkey to walk over them—which shows that they regarded Jesus as a kind of king; we read in the New Testament of this custom of spreading your clothes out in front of the king's horse—the same idea as when British Rail roll out red carpets when potentates are getting in and out of trains. . . . And when the city of Jerusalem came into view, after half a mile or so, the disciples began to sing. You have this picture then of really rather a wild procession, Jesus on a donkey at the heart of it, with his friends and disciples by now presumably half-naked, flinging their clothes enthusiastically down on the road in front of him, rejoicing and praising God with a loud voice, shouting and yelling, *chanting* (you know how the marchers chant on a demo; you must have seen them on television if you haven't been on one yourselves): 'Blessed be the king who comes in the name of the Lord, peace in heaven, glory in the highest'.

The Pharisees were there, of course, standing in the crowd. They tried to interrupt, to get Jesus to discourage his disciples, to stop the march, to stop them singing and dancing and throwing their clothes about; but Jesus refuses—he's demonstrating, he's acting out the prophecy of Zechariah, he says that if the marchers didn't shout out, then the cobbles in the street would, for the secret of his identity must out. He is showing what his power is, he is demonstrating what he has to offer.

The demo fails, of course. Only his friends and disciples have got the point, the rest of the city is doomed. Jesus sees the disaster bound to come, he knows there are other people in the city planning a different sort of demonstration, he knows that the Zealots are going to try to rid the city of the Roman occupation troops by force, by an armed uprising, by the rebellion which came in the year 70 but had been coming for a long time. It took no great foresight to see it coming, it took no great foresight to see that it would fail, disastrously. That way of saving the city, that way of liberating the people, was doomed to failure: that is what Jesus was saying. He was saying that a nationalist uprising against the Romans would fail, that this was not the way, and I think he must have thought this because really it would just be replacing one form of life by another very like it—it would not be offering a new sort of life altogether. . . .

And that is what Jesus's demo was about. What the disciples were chanting gives us the clue—'Peace in heaven, glory in the highest'. They were chanting slogans from the psalms—cries, acclamations, that clearly indicate that they recognized Jesus as the messiah, as a funny sort of liberator. The whole scene is so alive, so anarchic. They were obviously enjoying themselves. Jesus on his donkey, surrounded by all these people throwing their clothes

about and chanting slogans from the ancient sacred books. In the other versions we're told that they were waving palm branches. It was like a hippy procession, flowers, chanting, extravagant gestures and a crowd of young people (Jesus himself wasn't more than thirty and many of his followers must certainly have been much younger) with something less than all their clothes on. Surely it was also a kind of joke. Jesus knew well enough what he was doing, riding into the city on a donkey. This was an ironic action, a parable, a demonstration of how his power worked. It was a power that produced 'peace', *shalom* . . . for the real joke is that you cannot see the point of the demo unless you know what the Old Testament means by *shalom*. It's an ordinary everyday word which the prophets took up and used for that sort of society, that sort of community, where alienation of man from man, domination and exploitation, have been replaced by well-being and mutual support. *Shalom* is the word that points to a very different way of living from the one to which we are accustomed.

You may say, if you like, that the sovereignty of Christ is in our hearts; but the point is that if this way of life is really in your heart then it must surely show up in your behaviour, and your behaviour means your relationships, not just your personal relationships because your personal relationships are inevitably also social relationships. Our homes, our families, our jobs—these all fit into a social context, they are social institutions. It is true that Jesus was not a political figure, it is true that the Gospel is not political in the ordinary sense. This demo, this march by Jesus and his followers on the city, was surely a gay and enjoyable occasion. It was a joke, a game, they were pulling the Pharisees' legs, they were satirizing the establishment. It was a protest march on behalf of *shalom*: a way in which people can be with one another instead of always being against one another. It was a rejection of that sort of being-against which characterizes so much of our society.

And the medium is the message, the demo is the gospel. *Shalom* is what Jesus and his followers offer: the style of community which is characterized by forgiveness and sharing and mutual responsiveness; and that it is a good-humoured and enjoyable experience is surely the message of this demonstration. By riding on a donkey, surrounded by his friends, waving flowers and chanting *shalom*, wishing peace to everyone who would listen, surely Jesus was offering a way of life, a vision of what human relations could be like if we too would join the movement . . . into the city, to a death, but a death accepted to make a different sort of life possible, a life of forgiveness and reconciliation and peace. Amen.

The Preparation

I entirely agree with Geoffrey Preston (*New Blackfriars*, March, 1970) as surely every preacher would, that the most important element in preparing a sermon is the sheer givenness of the text—not chosen by

oneself but imposed on one by the lectionary. This does not guarantee self-effacing submission to the text on the part of the preacher, far from it; but it ensures the minimum requirement that he should feel *bound*—obliged to keep down his pet theories and *bêtes noires* and bound to let the text say whatever there is in it for the occasion. While there are plainly many different sorts of valid preaching, there is a style of 'doctrinal preaching' which quickly moves away from the text altogether to launch out into general remarks, expository, polemical or sentimental as the case may be, either about current moral issues or at the level of Christian dogma. Of course we cannot refuse to face moral problems any more than we can behave as though gospel does not become dogma: neither withdrawal into the purely religious sphere nor assertion of an anti-historical fundamentalism is tolerable for the Catholic; but it seems to me that at the present time, at least in a discussing society, other situations (such as the confessional, the house mass, the study-group) are more amenable to the sorts of communication and argument which the intractability of ethics and the abstractness of developed doctrine finally require. And in a period when liturgy has been turned upside down, it seems to me that we must do whatever we can to allow the story of Jesus to make its impact, as *simply*, as eloquently and dramatically, as possible. The great liturgies of the past developed in an era of great preaching: the 'Fathers' whose homilies and hymns fed the language of worship for so long, were preaching bishops. It seems reasonable enough to expect, then, that our reconstructed liturgy must find life and depth not in scholarly research and prognosticating about Modern Man, but in the word of the preacher who is ready to let the story take hold of the imagination of the listeners.

Liturgy asks for celebration, and the function of the homily is surely to release us from the anxiety which inhibits us from liturgical celebration. The only way the preacher can let this release occur is by allowing the congregation to fall once more under the spell of the story. The inhibiting anxiety is profound: it is not a special difficulty felt by people brought up in a technological society, it is the permanent threat of ultimate silence, the fear that mankind is alone in the universe, that there is no reply to one's call. What we gather to do, is to appeal to the Father, and we overcome our deep nervousness about it only by doing so 'in the name of Jesus'. We have to associate ourselves once again with that man, and that means we have to yield once again to the spell of the gospel. There is no other way by which we can be drawn to the Father except by being attracted by the man in that story. Every other way leaves us 'in the lurch'. And we must find the story not just 'very interesting', we have to be held by it, fascinated and compelled by it, before we can ever have the courage to accept it as 'gospel', as God's appeal to us. Worship is our reply, eucharist is the proper response to gospel; but the life and depth of our response depends on our sense of confidence in surrender-

ing once again to the inexplicable attraction of the Jesus story. Then we have something to celebrate, then liturgy can become rejoicing.

Thinking along these lines, then, as I do, it seems appropriate, in the homily, simply to go through the text which one has just read out, to allow it to speak for itself, to allow the incident to reproduce itself in the imagination. I am not (to repeat) saying this is the only way to preach; I simply think it is important, especially at the present time, to make it possible for the story to make its own impact—not just on the mind but on the imagination. This visualizing of the given incident is nothing more than ‘composition of place’, a ‘method’ in Ignatian meditation-technique which was anticipated in the early Middle Ages, for instance by Aelred of Rievaulx. What happened, then, when I began to reconstruct the Palm Sunday story (Luke 19, 28 ff.) in my mind’s eye, was that it turned out to be the story of a kind of *demonstration*.

My ‘reading’ of this particular episode in the story of Jesus was, of course, partly dictated by the fact that the text had been given for the feast of Christ the King. I consulted one or two reference books to get a potted history (no more!) of the sort of piety and devotion which gave immediate rise to the invention of this feast. There is an important tradition of *Christus rex* theology and iconography which goes deep into medieval and patristic consciousness (cf. Jean Leclercq, *L’idée de la Royauté: du Christ au Moyen Age*, 1959) and would require eventually to be related to the central biblical theme of the Kingdom of God (Rudolf Schnackenburg, *God’s Rule and Kingdom*, 1963). The clue, the *slant*, for my reading of the text, came, however, simply from the information about the mid-nineteenth-century French bourgeois pressure-group, conservative enough in its outlook, which was largely responsible for the modern cultus of Christ as King. My general perspective thus became that of the social-political implications of accepting God’s sovereignty as manifested in the life of Jesus.

Once I had read the text I consulted some commentaries. G. B. Caird (1963) gave me the word I wanted: ‘Jesus intended a demonstration.’ He goes on as follows: ‘Probably he had in mind the prophecy (Zech. 9, 9-10) that one day a king would come to Zion, riding on a donkey to show that his authority rested not on military force but on his ability to establish a reign of universal peace.’ If Jesus intended to act out this prophecy, he must have done so to demonstrate that the ‘peace’ so long promised was not to be confused with the Zealot plans for an armed uprising against the Roman troops. It would seem that at least one Zealot had joined Jesus (Luke 6, 15); it is at any rate inconceivable that he was not aware of the movement and its aims (cf. J. W. Lightley, *Jewish Sects and Parties in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 1925).

The *style* of the ‘demonstration’ says something about its meaning. William Manson, in his commentary (1930), as well as helping me to

visualize the topography, gave me another hint in his reference to ‘the pacific mode of Jesus’ approach—he comes not as Warrior but as Prince of Peace—carrying out the spirit of his own teaching, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you’.

The commentators all refer to the ‘enthusiasm’ of the disciples, in throwing their clothes about and singing. But perhaps I got most help from Alfred Plummer’s commentary (first published in 1895). He also speaks of Jesus’s ‘enthusiastic friends’. He cites his own authorities: ‘Robinson tells how the people of Bethlehem spread their garments before the horses of the English consul and his suite (*Researches in Palestine*, i, p. 473): other instances in Wetstein on Matthew 21, 8.’ He has a good note on the ‘cries’, the acclamations from the psalms by which the disciples declare their acknowledgment of Jesus as the messiah. He goes on: ‘Hase calls attention to the audacity of the whole transaction. Jesus and his disciples were under the ban of the hierarchy. The Sanhedrin had issued a decree that, if any one knew where he was, he should give information, that they might arrest him (John 11, 57). And yet there are his disciples bringing him in triumph into Jerusalem, and the populace enthusiastically joining with them.’ The picture emerging was clearly of a demonstration, pacific, enthusiastic, daring. It was a protest.

It was more than a procession. As Plummer says: ‘While there is much in this triumphal procession that tells of royalty, there is also something which adds, My kingdom is not of this world. Against carnal chiliastic notions of the Kingdom this entry on “a colt the foal of an ass” is an *ironia realis* ordained by the Lord himself.’ That was the clue for which I was waiting. This procession was an *ironia realis*, an extended satire, a practical joke, a take-off. It was a send-up of ‘carnal chiliasm’, of political messianism, of secular utopianism. I had nothing to do but tell the story, to let the story tell itself. In fact, after a few minutes, the congregation visibly relaxed, smiled and enjoyed the sermon. I did not have the time or the inclination to spell much out in detail, but the point was taken, I think, in the relaxing of the atmosphere.

I remembered some remarks by Bernard Sharratt (*Slant* 25): ‘If socialism is allied to a relaxed being-with, to care and concern and “grace”, as capitalism is linked to a tense being-against, to dominance and will-power, then the appropriate life-style of a socialist is surely more one of joy, relaxation, humour—and the necessary reflection of that in the kind of demonstration, protest and criticism he engages in: the medium is part of the message, the life-style is part of the critique.’ The style of the demonstration is the gospel. *How* Jesus did and said things often proves more revealing than *what* he did and said. His freedom to liberate had something to do with his *joy*. There is a whole new theology of the humorous element in the gospel: Sam Keen’s *Apology for Wonder*, Harvey Cox’s *The Feast of Fools*, not to speak of Peter Berger’s *The Precarious Vision*:

‘To be ultimately serious about society means *ipso facto* to be caught within it. Thus even the revolutionary, who seeks to overthrow society and build a new one on the ruins of the old, is ultimately serious about his social involvements. Only a conception of man which transcends society can take social involvements with a grain of salt—or with tongue in cheek. . . . The entire domain of social and political action, however serious its involvements may often be, will always be “penultimate” in the Christian economy. Thus the Christian will engage himself in action passionately, but he will not allow his commitment to blind him to the comic aspects of his situation. He will deal with men without forgetting that they were children not so long ago. He will protest against injustice, but he will not absolutize this protest or make it the basis of his existence. He will build for the future, but he will do so in full awareness of the precariousness of all human construction on the quicksands of history. Above all, he will remember that the central message of the Christian faith is not a call to struggle but a call to joy.’

The slogans which the disciples chanted on the procession were drawn from the psalms. I fastened on the reference to ‘peace’, the biblical sense of which must be sought in the important Hebrew word *shalom*. So much has been written about this word, so little of it has passed through preaching into the ordinary Catholic consciousness. I recommend the account in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (1950), where it is pointed out that *shalom* is a comprehensive word, covering the manifold relationships of daily life: the fundamental meaning is ‘totality’, ‘well-being’: ‘the untrammelled, free growth of the soul (i.e. person) . . . harmonious community; the soul can only expand in conjunction with other souls . . . harmony, agreement, psychic community; . . . every form of happiness and free expansion, but the kernel of it is the community with others, the foundation of life’ (citing Johs. Pedersen, *Israel*, I-II, pp. 263-335). *Shalom* is the gift of God, this is what his sovereignty means. Salvation, deliverance, liberation, always means *shalom*.

You can’t say much in ten minutes, you can’t say much in ten pages. No sermon stands on its own; even the special sermon has its own aura. And certainly this particular homily belongs in the history of a particular man’s ministry to a particular congregation. The preacher cannot judge his ‘result’, he cannot even see all that went into his ‘preparation’, It is, proverbially, the ‘remote preparation’ that matters. But, with all the rest that is true, the gospel is the story of a man out of the past told as the story of our own significance. The story becomes gospel only when it is allowed to evoke Jesus, to quicken our sense of his impact upon us, as God’s sovereignty in history. And one of the ways of allowing God’s sovereignty to become manifest—a way particularly appropriate on the feast of Christ the King—is to shake ourselves out of our solemn earnestness, our desperate intransigence (whether conservative or revolutionary),

about the state of our civilization and about what is to be done. *Not* in order for us to opt out into a new otherworldliness, but simply to liberate us from the spell of our own absolutes, to deliver us from our own idols. 'We know of too many revolutions', writes Herbert Marcuse, 'through which the continuum of repression has been sustained, revolutions which have replaced one system of domination by another.' The story of Jesus has to be told so that it may be heard as deliverance from every absolutization of penultimate concerns. The *shalom* which God's sovereignty brings, makes our conservative myths of law and order and our revolutionary mystiques of solidarity look *salutarily* (but not totally!) ridiculous. The demonstration Jesus organized was a send up of political utopianism, but it remains for us a sacrament of freedom. Laughter is liberating: the effect of Jesus is deliverance from idolization; but how it happens, like making a good joke, is unpreparable, unpremeditated, literally *ex-temporaneous*. And finally—it is important too if the homily can release the congregation from the grip of that undue solemnity which so often inhibits us in church. Liturgy can be *celebrated* only if it too is felt to be less than ultimate; deliverance from absolutization of the ecclesiastical is another effect of the Gospel.

The New English Bible by Aelred Baker, O.S.B.

If anyone thinks there have been quite enough translations of the Bible already, he will have to think again, and make room on his bookshelf; for the New English Bible (NEB) has arrived. It was heralded in *The Times* on 25th February with a fanfare, unusually shrill and orchestrated. And well it might be, for this is news indeed. It completes a project begun in 1946 and undertaken by representatives of all the major Christian bodies in Great Britain and Ireland, except the Roman Catholics. Why not they? A recent national newspaper colour supplement answers that it is because Roman Catholic scholars were engaged on the Jerusalem Bible (JB). What, all of them and all the time? Well, perhaps it is an exaggeration, but there is prudence in the telling. For seeing the august body that sat in judgment on one another's work in committee stage, Roman Catholics could be nothing but admiring and grateful observers; which in fact, latterly, some of them officially were.

Review is necessary now only of the Old Testament as the New was published separately in 1961, to explode some of the critical booby traps. The Massoretic Hebrew text has been made the basis of the translation and the finest English scholars of a generation are