

Sunday Homily

SECOND SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS

2 JANUARY 2022

YEAR C

“The world did not know him.”

John 1:10

Illustration

One of the most striking, imaginative and moving memorials in the splendour of Westminster Abbey in London is the tomb of the unknown warrior. Westminster Abbey is the burial place of royalty, of politicians and poets, of people who have shaped their society and been thought worthy to lie in this hallowed ground. And there, right at the main door, is the unknown soldier, killed in the battlefield of the First World War. We don't know his name, or where he died, and it is important that we don't, because that way he holds the symbol for every soldier killed in every war.

Gospel Teaching

In today's Gospel reading, St John speaks of another unknown warrior – Jesus. Jesus comes to live, unknown, unrecognised, among his people, to save them. Like the unknown warrior in Westminster Abbey, he symbolises the human race.

But the bitterly ironic thing about this unknown human symbol, according to St John's Gospel, is that few people seem to know what it stands for, even with John the Baptist standing there shouting out his witness to Jesus.

John tells us with complete clarity exactly who Jesus is. In Mark's Gospel, we meet the human Jesus first, and we have to work out who he is as we follow him through the pages of the Gospel. Matthew and Luke do start with angelic messengers, making it clear what we are dealing with here, but they start the story with the birth of Jesus. John alone puts what is going to happen into the perspective of eternity.

The theme of choice runs through the whole of John's Gospel. Every person who meets Jesus must choose for him or against him, for the light or the dark. They do not, of course, all realise that that is the choice they are making. Those who reject Jesus do not realise that they are rejecting the maker and saviour of the world.

But they do know that they are rejecting a fellow human being, one who is good and truthful and who speaks for a new relationship between human beings, and

a new relationship with God. They do know what this human being symbolises, at least to some extent, and that is what they reject. They reject any redefinition of human beings. They choose to keep the old ordering of humanity, where the rich win, where the poor and the sick and the vulnerable are of no importance, where God agrees with the powerful. They reject the vision of humanity that is offered in Jesus.

Application

The people who met the earthly Jesus met another human being. How could they possibly know he was also the presence and action of God? How can St John possibly blame them for not recognising the life and light of the universe in this man?

So part of what we decide when we choose to be for Jesus or against is what kind of a world we think it is. Jesus, the unknown human being, is prepared to stand with all ordinary human beings and see how people value him. He is prepared to be misunderstood, reviled, hated, killed, as well as loved, honoured, obeyed and understood. He is prepared to be the symbol for the whole of humanity, to live as we live, die as we die.

If people had known how important Jesus was, they might have gone out of their way to get on his good side. But because he was just an unknown human being, they treated him according to their own natures and purposes. They showed their true selves, kind or unkind, prepared to see into the depths of things, or preferring superficiality. All of this, Jesus called out of people, just by being a symbol of all human beings, known and unknown.

So we who do know who Jesus is now have a vital key to the world. It is not that we have cleverly found out that he is really important and so ensured positions of power and status for ourselves. Instead, we have learned that God values human life – every human life – so enormously that he is prepared to live, unrecognised, the life of an unknown human being in order to bring God's own life into contact with humanity.

That means that we now know how to value human life, too. Jesus is the well-known human being in whom every unknown human life is symbolised, and so made precious.