Christ the King

Young people today are arrogant, they're disrespectful, selfish and not willing to listen to their elders. They love luxury, contradict their parents and terrorise those who are trying to teach them.

That may seem an unfortunate way to begin World Youth Day! But these are not my thoughts – rather, they echo the complaints of some ancient Greeks voiced more than two thousand years ago.

Each generation can convince itself that the next is, somehow, letting the side down.

But before those of us who are older are tempted to pass judgement, perhaps we might ask one question - what sort of world are we handing on?

Young people are told 'just be yourself' but are then led to compare themselves with others in a way that we never were. It's a world in which they are told 'everyone is special and can achieve anything' but then feel judged by appearance, popularity and how well they 'fit in'. There's a whole industry ready to assure them that happiness lies only in the things they have yet to possess.

Algorithms decide what appears on their screen next. It may not be something they have 'liked' but something on which they lingered just long enough to be shown one clip after another directing their attention to impossibly perfect things, experiences and people.

Those of us of an age may remember an unkind remark in the school playground which stayed with us for years. Well, imagine going home, shutting your bedroom door and finding such remarks on your 'phone as well. Faced with constant criticism, it's easy to feel you have something to prove.

But, hopefully, every young person who comes through the doors of this church will come to know, deep down, that Christ loves them simply for who they are, before they've proved anything. It's what sets Christians apart from a world in which, with all its competing voices and expectations, the Church places before us the image of Christ the King. He's a king who turns on its head everything the world tells us about power, success and happiness.

The Feast was established by Pope Pius XI just seven years after the end of the Great War. Not long after the guns had fallen silent and peace had been set by the Treaty of Versailles, his predecessor Pope Benedict XV warned that this new peace would not survive if residual hatred and bitterness remained.

He knew that the people of Germany deeply resented the reparations they were required to pay. Along with economic hardship and political instability, this resentment provided fertile ground for various extreme movements to flourish, including the Nazi party. It was in this wounded and divided world that the Holy Father instigated this feast of Christ the King.

He believed that when Christ is not at the centre of our lives, we fail to see people through His eyes, so giving free reign to our pride and jealousy to lead us to look down on others, resent their good fortune or simply look the other way when they need our help.

The Holy Father taught that the pursuit of wealth and power blinds us to the needs of others, and his fears were realised in a horrific way over a decade later, crystallised in the places of Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Dachau – names which still bear witness to what happens when Christ is put to one side and humans claim powers that belong only to God.

However, this feast is not simply a warning about political extremism or the times when society places God to one side.

It challenges us on a personal level too.

Because, slowly and imperceptibly, God can be replaced at the centre of our being as we allow the things of this world to shape our ambitions, influence our decisions and determine our priorities.

What sort of King is Christ?

We might expect such a feast as this to celebrate kingship by presenting us with scenes of majesty and triumph. Our Lord surrounded by angels, enthroned in glory, receiving the homage of the nations.

Instead, we find a man, naked and vulnerable, hanging on a cross.

Above His head is an inscription which declares Him to be a King – the King of the Jews. It's part of the mockery directed at Him by the people around Him who had jeered Him on His way to Calvary. Even one of the criminals crucified beside Him joins in that ridicule.

"If you are the Christ, save yourself and us too."

It's how the world thinks. If you possess power, use it. If you have authority, demonstrate it. If you are a king, prove yourself – defeat your enemies.

But Christ refuses to do this, not because He lacks power, but because His power is of an altogether different kind. His mission is not to save Himself but us.

So, our king wears a crown made of thorns. His throne is a cross. His victory achieved not by destroying enemies, but by loving them, even as they put Him to death - 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'.

One of the two men hanging beside Him looks across at this broken, bleeding man. A man apparently defeated and powerless, and somehow he recognises Christ as a King.

He says 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom'.

And Jesus replies:

'Today, you will be with me in paradise'.

This person who recognises Christ's kingship is not a powerful ruler, a religious leader or even a particularly respectable member of society.

He is a condemned criminal, a man whose life has gone terribly wrong but, still, He recognises His King. It's a turning point in his life which leads to a future that he could never have secured for himself.

And, in that scene on Calvary lies an extraordinary revelation of the nature of God's kingdom.

It's a kingdom in which no human life is beyond redemption, where failure need not have the final word, and where our worth is determined not in terms of achievement, status or reputation, and certainly not by the judgement of others.

This is the vision of greatness behind the feast of Christ the King and it's why today's celebration of World Youth Day is so important.

Because the Church needs young people, not simply as the Catholics of tomorrow, but as living and active members of the Body of Christ today.

To those of you who have helped organise this Mass - you are already helping this parish to worship and bear witness to Christ. Many of you have found faith having been brought up without it.

And to our parish you have brought your questions, your gifts and your experience of the world. And we have something to learn from you, just as you have something to receive from these people who have travelled further.

We need your enthusiasm. We need your idealism. We need to learn from your impatience with a world which so often falls short of what it ought to be.

Each one of us needs an example to follow and faith transmits most effectively not by what we say but by what we do.

So, today, each of us is called to ask what Christ our King is asking of me. How can I best put to use the gifts He has given to me? How can I keep Him at the centre of my life?

And to the young people here today, I'd say this. You do not have to wait until you're older to make a difference to the world. When you stand up for someone who is being mocked. When you make room in your life for someone who is lonely. When you swim against the tide of popular opinion, then you are already helping to bring about the Kingdom of Christ.

Those ancient Greeks complained about the younger generations. More than two thousand years later, some are still doing the same. But Christ is asking people of every age something more searching – what holds first place in my heart, and what needs to change if it is not Christ who reigns there?

His throne is a cross, His power is love and if we wonder where to begin, the man being crucified with Christ has already given us the words: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."