

# Comment

## *Christian Obedience*

Christian obedience cannot therefore be on the look out for thanks, merit or reward, because it proceeds from the noblest, indeed the only possible, reward that can fall to a person: the Christian's real reward is the election and calling that are constitutive of being a Christian; it is the actual chance to share in the life of Jesus Christ and in the efficacious gift of the Holy Spirit. . . . The great reward for a Christian is being a Christian, being allowed to respond to God by becoming a Christian.

Karl Barth

President John F. Kennedy, assassinated thirty years ago this year, is alleged to have remarked that having met many of the world's leading politicians he was amazed to find how second-rate they were. Anybody who has experienced the recent spate of British political biographies, written and broadcast, will probably find themselves in agreement with him. During these last months we have been hearing a lot of discussion about political leadership, loyalty and betrayal, democracy and the national interest. These reflections are being composed on the feast of Christ the King. The whole tone of this celebration is meant to provide Catholic Christians with a way of understanding some of these questions.

During the holy year of 1925 Pope Pius XI ordered that Christ the King be celebrated throughout the whole Church. It was a feast with a political edge, designed to be part of the Church's answer to certain political developments in Europe which the Pope believed undermined human dignity and threatened the peace of the world. The Pope was writing in what was becoming a Europe of the dictators. Mussolini already reigned supreme in Rome and was doing his best to eradicate the influence of the Catholic Church in public life, claiming that the first loyalty of any citizen was to the state and that every other tie was to be subordinate to that. Lenin had died shortly before, and Stalin was beginning on a reign of terror that was to send millions of his compatriots to mass graves. Eastern Europe was a political cauldron with authoritarian governments being established in almost every country all of them preaching an aggressive nationalism and ethnic purity. Hitler had begun his political career and was already a fervent admirer of Mussolini's policies. In emphasising the Kingship of Christ the Pope was stressing that for a Christian the sole master and teacher is Christ. He is to be King of our hearts and minds, he alone should reign over us and no other. It was precisely for this truth that our English martyrs died. As St

Thomas More said at his execution: "I die the King's good servant but God's first".

Pope Pius wrote that the dangerous political developments of the time stemmed from those people and nations who aspired to do without God replacing Him with the idolatry of the state, the party, the leader or the economy. From this attempt to do without God, so the Pope said in words which are as true now as they were then,

"come those bitter rivalries between nations, which still hinder so much the cause of peace; that insatiable greed which is so often hidden under a pretence of public spirit and patriotism, and gives rise to so many private quarrels; a blind and immoderate selfishness, making men seek nothing but their own comfort and advantage, and measure everything by these; no peace in the home, because men have forgotten, or neglect their duty; the unity and stability of the family undermined; society, in a word, shaken to its foundations and on the way to ruin."

It was a similar insight that prompted Karl Barth, the twenty-fifth anniversary of whose death this issue of *New Blackfriars* marks, to participate in the writing of the Barmen declaration in 1934. This document stated unequivocally that Jesus Christ was the sole Lord for Christians; it implicitly condemned the elevation of Hitler to the status of a national Messiah. It was Barth's refusal to take an oath of allegiance to Hitler, or to give the Nazi salute at the beginning of lectures, that earned him dismissal from his professorial chair and expulsion from Germany. Both Pius XI and Karl Barth foresaw that the horrors which were to befall Europe in the 1930s and 1940s would come from a failure of many Christians to take responsibility. Pius said "the present state of things can be attributed to a certain slowness and timidity in good people who are reluctant to engage in conflict or who make only weak resistance to things which deny human dignity and undermine charity". When Pope Pius wrote, many Christians, felt tempted to ask "when did we see these things happening and to whom?" (cf Mt. 25: 31-46) A great German pastor once said about the fear that caused people not to speak out in the 1930s,

"When they came for the trade unionists I said nothing, when they came for the academics I said nothing, when they came for the socialists I said nothing, when they came for the gypsies and homosexuals I said nothing, when they came for the Jews I said nothing, and now they are coming for me and there is no one to speak."

There are plenty of homeless, of naked and poor, of sick and lonely, of hungry and thirsty in our country, their number increases daily. Who will speak for them? Christ is King but his subjects are silent? Christ needs hands but who will work for him? Christ needs feet but who will walk for him? If our national greatness is founded on this level of misery it is less than worthless. In our country we have dethroned Christ; greed is king, selfishness and ambition are his ministers, and Christ begs in our streets.

AJW

## **Twenty-five Years On: A Catholic Commemoration of Karl Barth**

Aidan Nichols OP

Karl Barth was born in Basle in 1886, the descendant of a long line of Swiss Protestant pastors and burghers, who included in their ranks Jacob Burckhardt, the historian of the Italian Renaissance. His family were patricians and devotees of music and the arts, but they also had a simple devotion to Jesus. In the biography of Barth written, on the basis of his autobiographical essays and letters, by his last academic assistant, Eberhard Busch, we hear that Barth's earliest theological formation came from religious nursery-rhymes in the Basle dialect. His subsequent theological pilgrimage can be seen as a flight from, and then return to, the religious assurance of these children's songs - albeit in an infinitely more sophisticated manner. As he himself wrote, these songs

were the textbook from which I received my first theological instruction in a form which was appropriate for my immature years. What made an indelible impression on me was the homely self-