From space, Astronaut Aleksei Leonov reflected, “The earth was small like the moon, and so touchingly alone. Our home, that must be defended, like a holy relic” (1965, Voskhod 2). Sultan bin Salman al Saud speaking from the Space Shuttle Discovery (1985) said: “On the first day up in space we all pointed to our own countries. The third, or fourth day we were pointing to our continents. But the fifth day we were aware of only one earth”. And just a couple months ago, Scott Kelley, speaking from the international space station, said, “We don’t see any political borders up here... It makes me think we’re all one crew aboard the spaceship earth, flying through the universe.”

These astronauts and their journeys were screened to the leaders of 193 nations gathered in New York last September, to agree a set of Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs for the planet. As the Millennium Development Goals closed, Heads of State across the political spectrum committed to achieve extraordinary things in the next 15 years: End extreme poverty. Fight inequality and injustice, and Fix climate change. But how do these ambitions, structured in 17 goals, relate to the feast of Christ the King we celebrate today and will celebrate every year including 2030 when these goals expire, and beyond?

Video clips from space were not the only introit to prepare the leaders for their commitment. Shakira prefaced her performance of Lennon’s ‘Imagine’ with the words, “We live in a world in which many of those who were born poor will die poor. … Now is the time to not just imagine, but ‘do’.”

As Shakira closed, a young woman’s voice floated from the darkened balcony behind the gathered speakers. Turning, they saw Malala, teenage Pakistani activist, standing with 193 youth, from each of the countries present, each holding a blue lantern of hope. Over the ovation Malala pleaded for silence. Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahimin; in the name of God, the most beneficent the merciful. “How many more, how many more will we see being killed, being rejected, being neglected and being homeless - how many more?” Malala asked. “The world needs a change. It cannot change itself. It’s me, it’s you, it’s all of us, who have to bring that change.”

And, for the first time ever, none other than the Pope addressed the opening of this historic General Assembly. Pope Francis’ 49 minute lecture was dense, sober, shorn of sentimentality, without special effects, yet greeted by a thunderous and affectionate standing ovation.

I don’t know if it struck you, though, how distant such an occasion could seem from this Feast of Christ the King. From Lennon’s Marxist Utopia, to a Muslim invocation, to the scientific view of

earth from space, to Pope Francis, embraced by a balcony of silent lamplit youths, the implicit suggestion could be that our God, or any God, is too small, too particular, too parochial for the serious business of peace, development, and climate stabilization. The largeness of mind we need to address grave threats to humanity could seem to require us to lighten the hold of faith, so it gives way to something larger yet more stable and trustworthy.

But there are at least three reasons to continue to celebrate Christ the King precisely as these global goals – and other similar tasks you may be engaged in – unfold.

The first is practical. There is a marked difference between someone who does a job in order to get rich, get famous, or just get by, and someone who works primarily from a point of passion and deep interest. With the rise of terrorism and the destructive power of misguided faith, we are becoming deeply suspicious of devoted followers and utter self-giving to any cause. Yet it’s simply not enough “[i]f I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love,” as St Paul says.

Pope Francis too said “Solemn commitments are not enough” – neither for the SDGs nor in the Paris talks next week on climate change. “Political and economic activity is only effective,” he said, “when it is understood as a prudential activity, guided by a perennial concept of justice and constantly conscious of the fact that, above and beyond our plans and programmes, we are dealing with real men and women who … are often forced to live in great poverty, deprived of all rights.”4 Our faith can provide that perennial concept of justice, that awareness of the marginalized, and the personal energy of love, that makes action effective.

Second, the global goals sounded so uplifting in New York on a fair autumn day. And yet like any political enterprise, they are flawed and incomplete: 17 goals and 169 targets are hardly a manager’s dream package. The voices of cynicism and criticism are already piercing. And we’ve just started!

Faith in something beyond an earthly kingdom is needed most when dreams are tarnished. Speaking at the solemn profession of a Dominican brother, Father Ian Hislop OP said,

I am coming to the end of my religious life and you are now beginning yours. As I look back … Often I have laboured hard to construct something… when, inevitably, some idiot has come along after me and torn down all that I have built and called it progress. So, I want to give you this piece of counsel, whatever schemes you may hatch, whatever plans you may have formulated be sure of one thing, God will frustrate them!5

Hislop’s words are harsh – yet brilliantly wise and real. In today’s gospel, Jesus explains to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world.” Steadying our souls in the kingdom within gives us the staying power, the hope we need to continue serving without dismay or disillusion. We need staying power, girded by prayer, for compromises and shortcomings inevitably arise.

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Third, maybe it is not our God who is too small, too parochial – maybe it is our understanding that is too shallow. In his introduction to Pope Francis, Ban Ki Moon pointed out that in May 2014, the Pope “met with the full leadership of the United Nations system at the Vatican. He affirmed that we must mobilize the world beyond religious or political differences to forge a shared vision, a life of dignity for all.” His recent encyclical *Laudato Si* sought “to address every person living on the planet.”

To mobilize the world beyond religious differences as Christians may require our theology to shift. On this feast of Christ the King – before we prepare in Advent for the Incarnation of our Lord in a baby – we recognise that the Risen Christ is no stranger to the Buddha, to Confucius, the prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, much less to atheists and agnostics. Their spheres intermingle. Nor is Christ’s field of concern confined to humanity or to life on earth. It stretches across time to the furthest speck of the universe. It is not innocent of misunderstanding. Christ is not an earthly king – glorious, powerful, patriarchal, and hierarchical. Rather, the Jesus we know as servant and brother, as healer and teacher and footwasher and Redeemer, this kenotic force of living love, is alone vested with ultimate authority across the universe. *This* is what we celebrate.

In her recent book *Making All things New* (Orbis, 2015), Franciscan Sister Ilia Delio writes of Christ’s ongoing emergence in history. Interpreting scientific discoveries as if they were fully sacred, receptive and appreciative of other faiths, unafraid for the church, and deeply faithful, she urges Christian and the church not to be daunted by a tricky moment in history, and not to lose our nerve. In order to follow Christ in these times, she writes, “Christians…must choose to evolve; to become conscious of what is yet unconscious …; to connect … to the whole planet…” And, putting on the mind of Christ, to act. “Emblazon this world,” she counsels, “with the grandeur of God.”

In the coming 15 years, we will hear, time to time, our successes and our stalemates as a crew on spaceship earth, hurtling through space, advancing global goals. Some here may play a more active part, as scientists, lawyers, physicists, diplomats, or artists. Some may help articulate a more ample Christian cosmology. You may represent your country at a Heads of State Summit only to see Magdalen College Choir, not Shakira, opening the events! The message for today, on the Feast of Christ the King, is: Our faith is not too small, too parochial for this task; its truths are not in decline. Rather, we are called forward to follow Christ, the Risen Lord and to emblazon this world with the grandeur of God. I close with a (excerpt of the) prayer from Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato Si*.

God of love, show us our place in this world
as channels of your love for all the creatures of this earth,
for not one of them is forgotten in your sight.
Enlighten those who possess power and money
that they may avoid the sin of indifference,
that they may love the common good, advance the weak,
and care for this world in which we live.
The poor and the earth are crying out.

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O Lord, seize us with your power and light,
help us to protect all life, to prepare for a better future,
for the coming of your Kingdom of justice, peace, love and beauty.
Praise be to you! Amen.