

Sunday 22nd November 2020

Matthew 25 v 31 – 46 / Ephesians 1 v 15 - 23

Let us pray,

***May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight oh Lord,
Amen.***

I wonder where your mind went when you heard the gospel reading this morning. Perhaps it went back in time and remembered the sermon Andrew preached when he told us how to tell the difference between sheep and goats by their tails, or to your family and thinking what does this judgment mean for them or to thoughts of salvation by good works. For me, it always takes me back to a lecture room in Cliff college whilst I was studying there. The sheep were grazing on the Derbyshire hills outside the window and the tale was told of the last day of a holiday bible club for children and young people. At the last session, the children were asked to choose if they were sheep and wanted to follow Jesus or goats as they were not yet ready to make a commitment. After the question was asked, they were told to choose which door to leave by, the one on the right for sheep and if they weren't going that way, then to leave by the door on the left where they would receive a pencil and could then go home. The choice – Jesus or a pencil. The leaders seemed surprised when most children chose – a pencil!

There is no doubt that this passage is about judgement and it comes at the end of a series of parables about the end times which we have heard about over the last few weeks where Jesus' followers are encouraged to be faithful, to be prepared and to invest their lives to better the kingdom. However, I think with this passage we often get it wrong and seem to think that it is our right to judge people's standing with God but this isn't our right, just as it wasn't the right of James and John's mother to ask if they could sit on the left and right of Jesus' throne in his kingdom. We do not know what relationships individuals have with Jesus – but it doesn't stop us praying for our loved ones to experience the difference knowing he loves them can make in their lives now, not just when they meet him face to face. I personally think it is quite a relief that it is the Son of Man who judges and not us!

So although this passage points, as the previous parables do to the end times when Jesus will come again as king, it also has something to say to us about life here and how and is actually quite challenging and relevant to us, especially today when we reflect on Jesus as king, seated on the throne, already ruling his kingdom.

Our Ephesians reading tells us that God raised Jesus from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places. From here he rules the cosmos and is above all other powers. From this position of power he reaches out to all humanity in love. He has shown this love, through his willingness to embody love without limit in offering himself for the sake of the world. In his resurrection, lies the promise of reconciliation and the fulness of life. One day he will come again in glory and this is the hope to which he has called us. When we keep the feast of Christ the king we are saying that it is Christ's sovereignty that has the last word. Whatever is going on in our world at the current time is not the last word, Jesus Christ is. And the second half of the passage gives us some idea of how he desires us to live as citizens of the kingdom and this has led me to wonder, whether this means, that we who claim Christ as our King, are daily being judged as sheep or goats as we seek to live lives worthy of the Kingdom of God.

The instructions Jesus gives to his disciples here, are recorded by Matthew during the events of Holy week, just before the trauma of Maundy Thursday, where Jesus will give his life for humanity. He is instructing them as to how to live their lives in order to continue the work that he has begun. He knows that his ministry on earth is coming to an end and that when he is raised to glory it will be the calling of his followers to continue his work, especially among the vulnerable of society. Amazingly Paul tells the Ephesians that this is possible because the same power that rose Jesus from the dead is now given to those who put their faith in him, it is given to us – to you and to me. The church has become his body here on earth, a theme which was taken up by Teresa of Avila in her famous words, "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

We do not need to earn our salvation or our place in the kingdom, Jesus has done that for us but we do have a choice as to how we live our daily lives in order to fulfil the commandments given to us to love God and to love our neighbour. As believers we no longer have any excuses to avoid those who Jesus calls the least. If I believe that all humanity is created in the image of God, then I realise that all the choices I make will affect others and in so doing affect God who is love, residing in all people. Because of this I think some days I make wrong choices and perhaps then I can be counted among the goats but on other days, the choices I make mean I am with the sheep – I wonder if that is the same for you?

What we are called to do is actually quite simple – to feed the hungry, to give the thirsty something to drink, to welcome the stranger, to cloth the naked, to care for the sick and to visit those in prison – because in doing this for any in need, we are told we are doing it for Jesus. When we ignore people with these needs, intentionally or unintentionally, we are ignoring Jesus and not living as citizens of the kingdom. We are being asked to commit to continuing Jesus' life of service amongst the poor, not through great heroic acts but by our concern and loving-kindness for others. Buying a few extra items each week in our shopping and donating them to the foodbank, going through our wardrobe and taking clothes we no longer wear to the charity shop, buying a friend a cup of coffee, sending a card to someone who we know is unwell, talking to the cashier in the supermarket as we pay or praying for those in prison are sheep-like acts, enabling those we care for to experience more of God's grace and in turn learning more ourselves about serving Christ the King – the king who wears both a crown of thorns and a crown of glory.

I was very moved the other day to hear the story of Alphonsus Rodriguez. He was born in 1533 in Spain. He had a very hard life with his father dying when he was 14 and then his wife and three children dying. At the age of 40 he tried to join a Jesuit monastery but was considered too old and too uneducated to be a priest. Instead he was sent to a Jesuit college on the Spanish island of Majorca where he served as a porter and doorkeeper for the rest of his life. In this role, every day when the doorbell rang he would say "I'm coming, Lord." And would then welcome the visitor, whether they were rich or poor, as Christ himself. Over many years he met the basic needs of people and loved them into the Kingdom.

I wonder what difference it would make to us this week and through Advent as we prepare for the coming of the King as both a baby born to die and as the risen and glorified saviour who will return in his glory with all the angels with him as Matthew says, if we turned the ordinariness of our life into moments of encounter with God, answering the door, the phone or emails, when joining a zoom meeting for example, with an attitude that says "I'm coming Lord" and showing loving kindness to all we meet, or pray for, being mindful of the simple acts of kindness that Jesus has instructed us to do. Maybe, then we will have a fresh encounter with Christ the King and with our eyes enlightened, may know more of the hope to which he has called us, experiencing a little more of the inheritance of the Kingdom of God, being counted amongst the sheep.

I am coming Lord. Amen