

Christ the King. 22 November 2020. Who are we?

What a relief! Isn't it nice to have a straightforward, simple, clear cut piece of the Gospel to read!! So often the readings we have are complicated and a bit difficult to understand. How good is it to have something so easily interpreted! Matthew 25 (31-46) - the sheep and the goats. The people who do the right thing get pats on the head and there are smiles all around. And the people who do the wrong thing get zapped and blown away. So – do the right thing and God will love you. Do the wrong thing and you are toast. End of sermon.

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But ... When Jesus tells such dramatic and contrasting stories ... when the pictures are so stark and obvious ... when things seem so simple ... I always wonder what is actually going on here.

Matthew's Gospel is the Gospel of the Church. This was the second or third of the Gospel accounts to be compiled, probably in the latter part of the first century. It is the only one of the Gospels in which the word which we translate 'church' (*ekklesia*) appears – Matthew 16:18 'You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church' Jesus says. It is also a very carefully structured book of instruction to an organisation already in the process of ordering its life.

Throughout this past year, time after time, as we have read from Matthew's Gospel we have been reminded that it is not just about hearing the story – it is not just enough to know things about Jesus. This is a story which is being told so that it will be yeast in our lives – so that it will touch us, disturb us, have an effect on us, change and shape our living. If we read it with ears that are not open to that and hearts that are not prepared to be radically changed by the experience then we could ask – why bother reading it at all?

That sounds like a fundamental question about encountering the Bible at all – which it is. In a sermon some years ago, as part of the celebrations of the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, reflected on the King James Version of the Bible and on what makes a good translation: *"A good translation [he said] will be an invitation to read again, and to probe, and reflect, and imagine with the text. Rather than letting me say, 'Now I understand', it prompts the response, 'Now the work begins.'"*

Matthew's Gospel is explicitly addressing us in that way. For the author and for the community of which he was a part and the communities which he knew would be reading and re-reading the texts - they knew they were at the beginning of a new time, a new work, a new era in the interaction between God and humanity. It was nothing less than the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God into human lives in a new and radical way. The question for them – and so also for us all these centuries later – was not how we are called to be the church as an organisation. It was an invitation to consider deeply within each and every person 'How do I live as a kingdom person?' 'How do I live in such a way that I show in my life that Christ is MY King?'

So – almost at the end of the Gospel story - we have this depiction of a divine end of year prize-giving ceremony. The Son of Man – understood in the Gospels as Jesus – enters in procession with all the attending angels and takes his seat on a throne. Everybody is watching – they are all there – this is the BIG moment. And Jesus hands out the prizes to the good and tosses out the bad. That is all very simple – but the story is actually subversive to a simplistic interpretation.

What does a sheep look like? And what does a goat look like? And how can you tell the difference?? Would you be surprised to hear that in that part of the world at that time sheep and goats looked so similar that they were easily confused, hard to separate? Immediately there is grey in the story. It is not as simple as it may have seemed.

And then there is the way that the division is described between the good ones and the bad ones. Jesus does NOT say – ‘OK you lot over here on my right. On balance, most of the time, at least more than 50% of the available opportunities when you could do good, you did’. Nor does he say to the dejected looking ones on his left hand side ‘you might have tried but you didn’t try hard enough’. The division seems to be absolute and black and white. I don’t know what you would admit to but if it is as absolute as that I would probably end up being booted out down the left side exit. Who could possibly say that 100% of the time they had fed those who were hungry, satiated those who were thirsty, visited all the sick or imprisoned and clothed the naked as well!!!? Not me. I suspect not anyone.

So what is going on here in this story? What does this story mean in the pattern of instruction in Matthew’s whole narrative about how we are called to live and be as kingdom people?

The story is a challenge to a community already beginning to develop a tendency to institutional organisation and consciousness. It is a recalling to the purpose and way of life which should characterise the people who count Jesus as their King. It is the call to be people who are part of a community engaged in the world and seeking to make a difference. It is about being a people who are attentive to the downtrodden, dispossessed, weak and vulnerable. It is about being people who are so intent on recognising the face and presence of God in those who surround them that they serve them as they would serve God. And everything that applies to them applies to us.

How we treat those who are vulnerable around us expresses what is in our hearts. When they are ignored because we have matters too weighty and personal foibles too tightly held or institutional concerns which seem so pressing that we forget that we are here first of all to serve ... then perhaps we deserve to be rattled by the dire words of condemnation.

This is not a story about judgement though. It is not – and it is NEVER the case – that it is as simple as the ones who behave well get reward and the ones who behave badly get punished. That is not the nature and expression of the life of God. This is a story about stirring our hearts, stirring our consciences, reminding us through a dramatic and confronting story about essential characteristics which will be seen in the living of the reign of God in and through us. It is an invitation to live deeply and to have our citizenship in the Kingdom of Jesus so infused into our being that we live love not because it is the right thing to do but, surprisingly even sometimes to ourselves, simply because it is who we are.

Amen.

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