

LOOKING AHEAD: SUNDAY NOVEMBER 26th

Reading: Matthew 25:31 –46 [Christ the King]

Today is the final Sunday of the Church Year. Next week is Advent and on into Christmas, then Epiphany.

The last Sunday of the Year is reserved as ‘The Reign of Christ’ or ‘Christ the King’. In that is a reminder that the baby whose birth is soon to be celebrated is not just the quaint, humble story of ancient charm; this Jesus grows to be king. Kings had been significant in the people’s history, in the life of Israel. In ancient cultures a king was considered an intermediary of God, the reflection of God’s nature.

The marking of this Christian festival has its own interesting history. In many places around our world it will be a day of special feasting and celebration, a defining moment in the identity of groups of people. It is a community and cultural focus on ‘who we are’ as much as ‘what we believe’. But it is only a modern addition to the church calendar. Pope Pius XI declared the Festival in 1925, a recognition when the world was being summoned to loyalty by rising nation state powers, a time of dictators and threatening depression. In that historical context, Christ the King was a radical social and political statement of the first loyalty of Christian people. As humanity drifted into all manner of secularism and godlessness, the Pope called for an annual reminder of the sovereignty of God in Christ.

For the Gospel of Matthew it all comes to a dramatic resolution in this parable. Now is the actual Parousia, the coming of Jesus. The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary calls this the “*climatic point to which Matthew has carefully built. Following the long series of six parables and warnings about living responsibly so as to be ready for the coming of the Son of Man, Matthew reverts to the actual coming already*” [Eugene M Boring, New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Matthew, page 455]. That same commentary calls this scene ‘*not a parable, but an apocalyptic drama*’ [page 455].

Matthew’s Gospel has, since the beginning of chapter 21 assumed Jesus to be in Jerusalem in the final eventful week of his life and ministry. From here the Gospel has Jesus go on to share the Passover meal. A series of warnings about the coming judgement, have cautioned ‘get ready’, ‘be prepared’, following the rhetorical structure of ‘When this happens’. Now, figuratively, the Gospel’s moment has arrived. In these final sixteen verses Matthew draws together his image of the conflict between the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of Earth, he pronounces Jesus as throughout, shepherd, judge, King and Lord, and he underlines the centrality of acts motivated by love. This is the final teaching of Matthew’s story of Jesus; the remainder is narrative. In this parable, judgement has dawned. How we read and understand these final exhortations of Matthew needs to be congruent with the meaning of the previous parables of chapter 25.

Some Christian thinking likes to hold that it is ours to tell the sheep apart from the goats. That we know the difference and can, perhaps, contentedly assume our safe and rightful place amongst the ‘good’. I had a salutary experience of this driving the 19 kilometres of the winding Jericho road down from Jerusalem when living in this part of the world. I was a recent-arrival in the country [Palestine/Israel] and everything was a sight to behold. On a dusty hillside sloping alongside the roadway I spotted a wandering Bedouin shepherd and his herd. Observing the scraggy flock, with hanging hair, I exclaimed to my friend and guide, Bishara, “*Oh, look, a shepherd and goats*”. Bishara, my Moslem friend, likely unfamiliar with the biblical associations this sight was having for me responded, “*No, Mr Phil. This is a shepherd and his sheep*”. But I thought sheep were white and fluffy, I mused to myself. Apparently not so in the Middle east. “*I am sorry, Mr Phil*”, interrupted Bishara again, “*These are sheep and goats. A mixed flock. Like most herds in this country*”. Then he turned to me and gave a knowing smile. “*But I tell you the truth, Mr*

Phil. Only the shepherd he know which are the sheep and which are the goats". There in the land, it is the Master's task to know his flock.

Of all the things on which we might anticipate God might judge and separate as a shepherd does his sheep and goats, (belief, doctrine, morality, sexuality), it comes down to acts of mercy and kindness which are finally the key. The New Interpreter's Commentary says, "*To the reader's surprise (ancient and modern), the criterion of judgement is not confession of faith in Christ... What counts is whether one has acted with loving care for needy people*" [Matthew, page 455]. Like 'oil' in the parable of the wise and foolish virgins and 'money' in the parable of the 'talents', it is ultimately all about what you do, actions. Matthew returns to his theology evident in chapter 16 where he has already stated that "*for the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay every man for what he has done*" [verse 27, emphasis mine]. Here again is the Christian faith's paradox at its heart; living a life of response to God is all grace and all actions. Quoting the New Interpreter's Commentary, "*The fundamental thrust of this scene is that when people respond to human need, or fail to respond, they are in fact responding, or failing to respond, to Christ. Yet this turns out to be a surprise to both groups*" [page 456].

Note that the judgement Matthew envisages is of "all the nations". This is Matthew's grand vision, his final hope. We have personalised and somewhat trivialised the final judgement into an individual process of 'yes' or 'no', 'made it' or 'failed'. The resources for "Seasons of the Spirit" note five characteristics of God's saving action in this biblical picture: "*it is all-embracing, inexplicable, real and tangible, encounters hostility as well as welcome, and calls for a response.*"

After the judgement has been issued and the sheep and goats are separated, the King moves amongst his subjects, offering words of encouragement or explanation. This is not the source judgement, the basis of the king's decree. It is the speech after the sentence has been issued.

"Christian writer Leander Keck has said, "*We have paid a price for freeing ourselves from the idea of final judgement. To abandon the last judgement is also to abandon the conviction that our lives and final matters is dependent upon something outside ourselves.*"

THEMES: Compassionate action, faithfulness, the call of the Christian.
