

Sermon for Christ the King – 23rd November 2014

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24

Matthew 25: 31-46

The Book of Matthew has been called 'a grim book.' A New Testament Scholar once said to me about today's reading from Matthew, 'It's the scariest passage in the whole Bible'. And I think the grimness and the scariness comes from the fear of separation. For several weeks now our Sunday Gospel readings have dealt with the potential for separation – between those who are prepared for Jesus' coming, and those who are unprepared, between those who dare to live and take risks for the Kingdom, and those who fail to, and today, the final judgement, between the righteous and the unrighteous. It's uncomfortable, the idea of separation from others, separation from God. It sits uneasily with our ideals of unity, of inclusion, of acceptance.

And yes, it IS scary, if we think that the judgement that the passage deals with is like a TV talent show (The X factor perhaps?), where as a competitor I've done my best, thought I've done what's needed, but I've no idea what the judges are looking for! On a show such as The X Factor, the judgements made often appear arbitrary, taken on a whim. The possibility of failure, of rejection, is a real possibility.

Is this the kind of judgement Jesus is presenting us with? No, I don't believe so, because that would be terrifying... and I don't believe that we're meant to be scared by this teaching. Fear paralyses, fear shuts down, fear causes inaction – fear inhibits life. God is love, and there is no room for fear in love. But there is challenge, with God. This passage fundamentally challenges us about our response to others in need, and its relationship to righteousness.

There's a story about Martin of Tours, later a Bishop and a Saint, who as a Roman soldier, was asked for money by a beggar on the way into a city. He had no money, but seeing that the man was cold, he took off his worn out soldier's coat and tore it in two, giving one half to the beggar. That night he had a dream in which he saw Jesus and the angels in heaven. One of the angels asked Jesus why he was wearing a worn out cloak. Jesus replied 'My servant Martin gave it to me.'

The thing is, Jesus doesn't say to the righteous, the sheep, 'Just as you did these things (fed me, clothed me, visited me) to others, it was AS IF you did them for me.' He says 'When you did these things, you did them for me.' This statement, and the story of Martin, invites us to see Christ in all people in need. To see a hungry person, a person who is sick, a person who is in prison, is to see Christ in need. Righteousness means meeting Christ's needs in others, regardless of the circumstances.

And the righteous in the story who have done these good things for Jesus haven't done it consciously. They, like the unrighteous, ask 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or naked, or sick, or in prison?' They weren't trying to engineer their salvation, they were simply responding to human need where they saw it. Righteousness, on this analysis, doesn't consist of believing the 'right' things,

passing a doctrinal test, doesn't consist of the extent to which we pray, or fast, or go to church - it's simply about responding to the needs of others.

It challenges me - challenges us. Isn't what Jesus is asking too much – a standard too high to meet, 100 per cent of the time? I think of the time when I was in too much of a hurry to stop and talk to the homeless person at the end of my street...or when I was grumpy instead of grateful to the person on the other end of the phone line in a call centre. And I think of our corporate failure as a society to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor, our corporate failure that, despite being the 7th richest nation in the world, we have an ever-growing number of food banks.

Jesus' invitation to follow him and our 'Yes' to that, not in fear of judgement, but in response to God's love, includes a 'Yes' to our part in the work of the Kingdom to feed the hungry, clothe those in need, visit the sick, those in prison, love those who are difficult to love, include those who are different from me. And we all fail, sometimes - I do, often - because it's hard. But there is grace. In saying 'Yes' to following Christ, we're not left alone to struggle in this work. In our reading from Ezekiel God promises 'I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak.'

The story of Martin also reminds us that it can be in the simplest things we can serve others. It may be individually on a one-to-one basis through prayer or action. Or we may feel called to getting involved on a political or community level. It may be in the choices we make, individually, and as a church, challenging ourselves and others in positions of influence, about what our priorities should be if we are to meet the needs of those who are poor – in resources, or in mind, body, or spirit.

Another story. A tradition from St Ambrose says that, following the death of the current Pope, the Roman Prefect of the time demanded that Lawrence, a Deacon, should present to him the riches of the Church. Lawrence appeared before the Prefect three days later, and around him were gathered poor people, blind people, the sick, and the suffering. 'These are the 'true treasures of the Church', says Lawrence... 'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also', says Jesus.

I wonder how it would be if, as a society, as a church, and as individuals, we asked God every day for the vision to treasure what he treasures, to see the world through his eyes and the needs around us, and for the wisdom and courage to respond to those needs?