

Matthew 25:31-46

‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.”

Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

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Today is the final Sunday of the Church’s year: next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the new year. As we leave behind this year we begin the Advent journey towards Bethlehem, looking forward to the coming of the Christ Child.

Our gospel reading today presents Christ as the King, the judge of all humanity. Matthew pictures Jesus sitting on a throne in glory, surrounded by angels and dividing all the assembled people as a shepherd divides the sheep and the goats of his flock.

This is a very different picture of Jesus to that presented at the beginning of this gospel, when he is seen as a new-born baby: but for Matthew Jesus is always a king. He has the Wise Men from the East asking Herod to direct them to the one born King of the Jews, and they present the baby with royal gifts. So we are given a clue that Jesus is more than he appears to be right at the beginning, and then Matthew shows us the King in all his glory through this story told near the end of his gospel, and near the end of Jesus’ earthly life.

Even though Jesus is pictured as the Son of Man, a glorious King with the power to judge us all, look at how he judges, the criteria he uses to separate the sheep from the goats. Is he looking for those who are the most fervent believers? The ones who went to church every Sunday, or put the most in the plate, or read their Bibles and prayed constantly?

No, he isn’t- not that there is anything wrong with those things, but that’s not what he is looking for. He’s looking for whether we have reached out to those who are the least, the last and the lost.

This is the only description of the Last Judgement to be found in the New Testament. In it, Jesus says nothing about theology, creeds or orthodoxy, or any of the things the church has argued about for centuries. The only criterion he uses to judge people is whether or not you saw Jesus in the face of the needy, and whether you gave yourself away in love in his name.

Some people in the story asked Jesus: 'When did we feed or clothe you, welcome you or visit you in prison?' So we need to reach out to people as they are, for who they are; for themselves. We don't need to pretend that the odorous street-person we give money to is actually Jesus in disguise: we give because she or he needs it. Need is the only criterion for giving.

We are not to give help or money or food or whatever to people in order to earn our place in heaven, or even because it makes us feel good: we love others with the overwhelmingly generous, overflowing love with which God has filled us.

Jesus said, 'Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, so you did it to me.'

Note that Jesus said ONE of the least of these: not all of them.

We cannot feed every hungry person or visit every prisoner; the need is never-ending and we will only despair if we think we have to do it all. If we are open to the guiding of the Spirit we will know when we need to reach out to someone; and there will be someone, or a succession of 'someones', for each of us. Even so, this is a challenge for us. It is easier to avert our eyes from the person sitting on the footpath and begging in the city than it is to make eye contact, speak and give them something. It is easier to make judgements about street people, or those who knock on church doors asking for food or money; easier to judge prisoners or refugees than to ask why they are in such a predicament.

For Jesus, there are no such categories as 'deserving' or 'undeserving' poor- just the poor. No such thing as a 'genuine' refugee- only people seeking refuge.

This story challenges our understanding of God, and of who Jesus is, and of who we are.

God is not only the all-powerful creator of the universe, but is also present with us; God is with us in the messes we make of our world and our lives.

Jesus is not only Christ the King, our Saviour and Messiah; Jesus identifies so strongly with poor, suffering, downtrodden people that he says any service to them is a service to him.

We are not only those who are called to serve Jesus by serving others; we are also, perhaps at different times in our lives, people in need of love and care. There may be times when we are poor- either financially or in other ways. There will be times when we are sick, or lonely, or bereaved; when we hunger for affection and understanding; when we find ourselves among strangers and in need of welcoming hospitality. Then we pray that someone else will see the face of Jesus in our faces.

To summarise: it doesn't matter so much what we might believe about judgement or heaven or hell; what really matters is how we live and love, and how we respond to those that Jesus tells us to care for. On this last day of the Church's year, may we resolve to begin the new year with our eyes open to see what Jesus is showing us and what he is asking us to do.

The Lord be with you.