

Serving the King

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 26th November 2023 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

Introduction:

Today is the feast of Christ the King - a tradition which Anglicanism has adopted very recently from the Catholics. The feast of Christ the King was initiated in 1925 by Pope Pius XI in response to the rise of secularism and atheism in Europe. In the face of the political and social uncertainties in the aftermath of the First World War, a reminder that Christ had been given by God "all authority in heaven and earth"¹ was no doubt timely. In our own day, I think it is equally relevant, and particularly so as we prepare for the beginning of Advent.

Judgement Day

Today's Gospel reading comes at the end of two chapters in which Jesus is teaching on the Mount of Olives, just opposite Jerusalem, two days before the Passover Festival at which he will be betrayed, tried and executed. His disciples point out the beauty of the Temple, to which Jesus replies that it is going to be destroyed. Jesus gives a lengthy prophecy about forthcoming disasters that will come upon the world, as well as the persecution of his followers and the rise of false prophets. These will be followed by the coming of the Son

¹ Matthew 28:18

of Man “in power and great glory”,² a clear reference to the prophecy in Daniel chapter 7. Jesus has used the phrase “Son of Man” to refer to himself, and so he is indicating that one day he will return, to bring about the Day of Judgement which was anticipated in writings of the Old Testament and later Jewish texts. A shorter version of this in Mark’s version will be read next week, Advent Sunday. The warning to the church is that we need to be ready, as we will not know when it will happen. (We heard this echoed last week in Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians.)

Matthew follows this prophecy of Jesus with two parables. The first, about the five wise and five foolish female wedding attendants³, is a warning to Christians to make sure our lights keep shining by keeping them topped up with the oil of the Holy Spirit, while we wait for the Bridegroom – Jesus – to appear. Failure to do so would mean being excluded from the “wedding feast”, which represents the joys of heaven.

In the second parable, known as the Parable of the Talents, we are challenged to make good use of the resources we have been entrusted with, in order to carry on doing the business of God’s Kingdom on behalf of our master, Jesus. When the master returns in the story he requires an accounting from his servants as to what they have done with his property. In the same way, Jesus implies, we will have to give an account for our lives and the business we have engaged in to further God’s Kingdom.

² Matthew 24:30

³ Matthew 25:1-13

Sheep and Goats

Today's reading concludes this section of Matthew's gospel. These final verses of chapter 25 have been called "The parable of the Sheep and the Goats", but it's not really a parable, more a teaching of what will happen "when the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him".⁴ The bit which could be called a parable is simply the analogy Jesus draws between the way a shepherd separates sheep from goats and the way the Messiah will separate the righteous from the unrighteous.

Sheep and goats in Jesus's day looked pretty similar. But a shepherd could tell them apart, and at certain times would separate out a mixed flock because the two species had different needs. In this passage, the King, which is understood as the Messiah when he returns to judge the world, will separate the righteous from the unrighteous. The unrighteous "will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life".⁵

This is a very stark contrast, and the passage is, as it were, Jesus' final warning that how we live on earth will have consequences for our eternal future. His teaching builds on the theme of righteousness which is important in the Old Testament. The books of Psalms and Proverbs often contrast the righteous, who seek to obey the commandments of God in their daily lives, with the wicked, who live for themselves, exploiting and hurting others in the process. But the narrative parts of the Old Testament show

⁴ Matthew 25:31 NRSV

⁵ Matthew 25:46 NRSV

that human beings often combine good and bad traits. We know from experience that people can sometimes display exemplary behaviour but at other times are capable of serious selfishness, greed and cruelty.

Who are the righteous?

So how do we know whether we are sheep or goats? Are we among the righteous who will “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world⁶”, or do we belong to those who will be excluded from the kingdom?

St Paul famously wrote in his letter to the church in Rome that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”⁷, which on its own would mean that we are all unrighteous, and therefore doomed. But he went on in the same passage to say that God’s grace brings about complete forgiveness, through the atoning death of Jesus on the Cross, when we put our faith in him.

We receive God’s grace when we are sorry for our sins and turn back to God in faith and obedience. His grace restores our relationship with him and with others, as we allow the Holy Spirit to change us and make us more like Jesus. And if our desire to follow Jesus is genuine, this will show itself in the way we treat others. Loving God and loving others go together. You may remember that the first letter of John says if we can’t love our brother or sister whom we have

⁶ Matthew 25:34 NRSV

⁷ Romans 3:23 NRSV

seen, how can we say we love God whom we have not seen?⁸

In our reading from Matthew’s gospel, Jesus spells out what this love could look like in practice: feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting those in prison. This is righteousness in action. It’s very different from *self-righteousness*, which is thinking you are morally superior to others, and is all about yourself. In the “sermon on the Mount” Jesus says

‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord”, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven.’⁹

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Here in chapter 25, Jesus says that “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”¹⁰ The question is, *who* does Jesus mean when he talks about the “members of my family”¹¹?

In chapter 12, Jesus said

“For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

When sending out his disciples to preach and heal, Jesus said that “whoever welcomes you, welcomes me.”¹² It seems that Jesus’ main point here in chapter 25 is that how

⁸ 1 John 4:20

⁹ Matthew 7:21 NRSV

¹⁰ 25:40 NRSV

¹¹ The original Greek says “brothers”, which would have been understood as shorthand for “brothers and sisters”.

¹² Matthew 10:50 NRSV

someone treats any of Jesus' followers, however unimportant they may seem, matters, because in serving one of his people we are serving Jesus himself.

This month this point is particularly relevant to us as we pray for the work of Barnabas Aid, who bring relief to Christians who are suffering throughout the world, whether through discrimination or persecution, or through poverty or natural disaster. We have a particular obligation to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Many people give to secular charities, but charities which have a particularly Christian focus rely on Christians like us for financial support, as well as prayer. Paul writes to the Galatians,

So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.¹³

I think it's common sense that Jesus doesn't want us *only* to be kind to other Christians. After all, the Parable of the Good Samaritan is about someone who helped a person whose religion and ethnicity were different from his own. He teaches that the two most important commandments are to love God and to love our neighbour, which includes people who are different from us.

But I think an important takeaway from today's gospel is that we have a particular obligation to care for our fellow-Christians. Our own church community is one place to practise Christian kindness. Let's all see how we can support other members of this church, perhaps by making an effort to chat to them, or visit them, or perhaps offering a lift to

¹³ Galatians 6:10 NRSV

church. As Paul wrote, let's look for opportunities to do good to other members of the Christian family. And let's also do good to everyone else as well!

Conclusion: sheep or goat?

So are you a sheep or a goat? Having come to communion today, and received a reminder of God's forgiveness in the bread and wine, will you go out and live in such a way that you keep in a right relationship with God *and* with others? What would practising righteousness in your daily life look like today? And on Judgement Day will you hear these words from Christ,

"Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"?