

Christ the King, 20th November 2011 – Sheep & Goats

Reading: Matthew 25: 31-46

“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.’”

In my ideal church building there would be two quotes carved above the front door. The first on the outside, where everybody could see it, would be a paraphrase of several verses in the gospels, “These people welcome tax collectors and sinners”. The second, on the inside, where only the people in the church could see it, would come from the 53rd chapter of the Rule of St Benedict and read “Let all guests be received as Christ”.

Last Wednesday night our Vestry a conversation about church and numbers and the direction we’re going in – it’s not an uncommon conversation, we’ve had it before as have many others. Meanwhile our Diocesan Standing Committee meeting last week received a report on parish statistics over the past 30 years that shows a steady decline in church attendance, which wouldn’t come as a great surprise to most of us I’m sure. Inevitably these conversations and reports lead to questions, ‘what are we doing wrong?’ Why aren’t our pews full? Why don’t we have more young families? Why is our youth group struggling? Do we need more music, or less music, or different music? Do we need more technology, or less technology, or different technology? Are we too conservative, or too liberal, or too boring? Surely if we were doing the right things in the right ways there would be more people, because then we know God is blessing us.

And that’s what it comes down to isn’t it – is God’s really blessing us? Because surely if God was blessing us we’d have more people? Except we kind of know that’s not necessarily true, but we kind of don’t. Don’t get me wrong, I ask all those questions too. In fact, I probably ask them more than most, because this is what I do. I pretty much eat, live and breathe the church, as anyone who’s had the misfortune of going out to dinner with me knows, so I’m vitally concerned about these questions, and to be honest I also wonder where all the young people, children and families are, because I feel like all these empty seats reflect directly back on me. But if you ask me am I – are we – blessed by God, well I really want to say yes.

We’re confronted by a difficult but vital gospel reading today, which you might be forgiven for thinking was deliberately picked for Christ the King Sunday because it fits so well. This passage comes at the end of Jesus’ eschatological discourse with his disciples – did you like the way I just dropped that smart sounding bit in there – and at the end of that conversation Jesus describes the Son of Man coming in glory, surrounded by angels, and sitting on his throne, just like a king. So the reading fits with the feast day, except if you think back seven days we heard the passage directly before this one last week, which wasn’t a feast day, so really today’s reading is just carrying on from all the readings we’ve heard over the past few weeks, about bridesmaids and talents, and faithful and unfaithful slaves, all of which bring us to this.

“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.”

I have to admit that I struggle with that imagery. Throughout the gospels, in the parables and the teachings, and especially in how Jesus meets with people and interacts with them, overwhelmingly and consistently what we get is an image of the kingdom of God as a place of welcome and inclusion, a wedding banquet to which all are invited, even the sinners and tax collectors, especially the sinners and tax collectors. Now though, in this reading, suddenly we're talking about who's in and who's out. Now we're talking about sheep and goats, and I struggle with what seem like inconsistencies between this and the other, but ultimately I think it all comes back to blessing.

"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'".

"You that are blessed." We've heard that word before in Matthew's gospel. More specifically we've heard that word before in this section of Matthew's gospel. The vast majority of Matthew is given over to Jesus' teaching, and especially what he teaches his disciples alone, and at the very beginning of that teaching we hear these words, "Blessed are the poor". And blessed are the meek and the pure and those who mourn and the peacemakers and all those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake – blessed are all these who sit at the bottom of the heap. Blessed are all these whom no one thinks are blessed. Blessed are all these who look at themselves and believe God has abandoned them. Blessed are the poor.

Jesus begins his instruction of the disciples with those radical, almost revolutionary words. He starts his teaching ministry by telling his followers to imagine an impossible world, and now he ends with something very similar. Immediately after this reading we move to the Passover and crucifixion, and therein I believe is a clue to how we should hear these verses. The king sits enthroned, judging the nations, and then we find this king revealing his true glory on the cross, he who would judge us judged first by and for us. The glory everyone expected the messiah to come in looked nothing like the glory it turns out to be, and maybe the blessing for those who follow him isn't quite what we think it should be either.

There are some points in this reading that are easy to gloss over. For a start, only the Son of Man can sort the sheep from the goats. This was something I learned over the past week. Apparently in the ancient near east young sheep and goats looked virtually alike. You needed to know something about animal husbandry to tell them apart and most didn't have that skill.

Secondly, everyone's surprised by what Jesus says. "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry?" Feeding the hungry and caring for the poor was everyone's responsibility in 1st century Palestine / Israel. Hospitality was a community expectation and failure to offer it was a serious breach of social etiquette, except in certain situations. There were people and situations where the normal rules didn't apply and you didn't have to provide food, or drink or care, only some people still did. They were the odd people, like the Good Samaritan, so for them, when Jesus says, "You did this for me" their response is "when?" They were just doing what they knew to be right.

Jesus begins his teaching with a reminder that the least in society are blessed; the poor, the meek, the persecuted, and now at the end of that teaching he says 'and blessed are you who helped.' I have long believed that far from being a list of saintly attributes, the beatitudes are actually a call to Christ's followers to make them real. 'Blessed are those who are poor' when you bless them, and in this reading, blessed are you when you bless them too, blessed are you when you do what you know to be right.

There's a word in here for all of us I think. I still believe we need to wrestle with the questions and remind ourselves that we are called to be an open and inclusive people, welcoming all as Christ among us. And yes, we need to find new ways to reach out and connect with those beyond us, to be the mission-shaped church we say we want to be. Doing that is our calling, our mission, the challenge laid before us by God, I believe that. And I believe that when we do that, when we live up to our calling, we're rewarded with the knowledge that that's what we're doing. But perhaps the reminder in today's reading is this; we're already blessed. We may not have the children we want, or the numbers we want, or many of the things that might look like success, but we are blessed; blessed right where we are, blessed as we are, blessed for just doing what we know to be right, blessed for caring for those who need caring for, blessed for doing what we can, even when its not much, blessed for trying, blessed for doing, even when we think it's just not enough.

"Come, you that are blessed."

I really want those messages carved into a church doorframe someday. I want to say to everyone out there, we welcome you unconditionally, and I want to say to everyone in here, 'do it'. But even more than that I think I want, I think I need, for us to know that we are blessed, with or without the signs, we are blessed. Thanks be to God.