

Year A Proper 34 2023 Reign of Christ Christ is Waiting Matthew 25 vv31 to 46

This is the last of Jesus' stories in Matthew's Gospel. We have been hearing a series of teaching parables – about wise and foolish bridesmaids, servants with absent masters...all aimed at showing us how we are to live in God's kingdom, through the long delay – but guaranteed return – of the master, of Jesus.

Right after this story, we head into the final days of Jesus – the last supper, his betrayal, his death on the cross. This parable we hear today is his grand finale, the last of his teaching, the summary of all that has come before and the reassurance of what will come – the fulness of God's kingdom...and the reality of judgement.

According to preaching great, Tom Long, the parable begins as a victory hymn to Christ set in the future: “when the Son of Man comes in his glory...” Jesus, who had nowhere to lay his head is now seated on the royal throne as king. Jesus, accused by the religious leaders of being an agent of Satan is now revealed as the holy Lord of lords. Jesus, judged and rejected even by his hometown is now exalted as the judge of the whole human family. Jesus, who resisted the devil's temptation to embrace the ways of world and acquire worldly power and authority is now, in his humbleness, elevated in glory above all earthly temples and in command of the angels (adapted from *Matthew* by Tom Long, p.284).

The scene before us is monumental in its vastness. *All* the nations of the world are gathered before Jesus as he sits on his throne. He sits in judgement but, the imagery used to describe the scene for us is the image of the shepherd.

Shepherds have undisputed authority over their flock but, at the same time, they are very close to their sheep. The relationship is one of care and protection. God

sends many leaders to guide us but our ultimate care and protection rests with God the Shepherd of all creation. The God of love *is* the God who judges.

In this light, we know that Jesus does not reign over all things like worldly kings and his kingdom is not like worldly kingdoms. The kingship of Christ has nothing in common with the images of absolute power, luxury, splendour, and so on, that are associated with the concept of king. God as Shepherd-King tends the frailest of the flock, does justice to the weak and the poor whom he protects against those wrongfully wielding power – against those using power to oppress, to further their own personal gain resulting in inequality and discrimination and much more brokenness. God as perfect king acts with mercy, compassion, and tenderness. And so, these are the standards used to judge the nations before him.

Jesus the King, on his throne, separates all the nations before him into the sheep and the goats. It turns out that the sheep are invited to fully enter into the perfection of the kingdom now on earth because they were the ones who provided food, drink, hospitality, clothing, and care for the Son of Man. The goats, though, did not supply these ministries to the Son of Man despite his needs – he was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, and in prison but they did not care for him. The goats are sent away to “eternal punishment”. Before you let your mind fill with images of so-called “hell”, ask yourself if the God of love would do such a thing. When you come across scripture that contradicts what we know of God, who is nothing but love and goodness, you absolutely should question it. Jesus just finished teaching us, in the story right before this one, that the servant who thought the master was harsh and punishing, taking what doesn’t belong to him,

was completely off base. Believing in a harsh master ended up leaving him out in the darkness in fear.

So, would our God of love send people into “eternal punishment”? I’m glad you asked. The word “punishment” that you hear in this story is the Greek word *kolasis*. *Kolasis* means “correction”. Importantly, it carries the sense of correction that matches or suits the one being corrected, and it also carries the sense of deprivation. Put all of that together and the one currently being rejected, not allowed into the fulness of God’s kingdom is being deprived of God’s presence. This person is being deprived of God’s presence because this person does not understand God and God’s ways. Those who believe in a harsh, punishing God do not have hearts filled with nothing but love, they do not look on the poor or the hungry with compassion but with the attitude of “getting what you deserve” and the oh-so-worldly, self-centred thinking, “they are not my problem.” The wonderful thing about correction, is that when these people *are* corrected, if or when they finally understand God and God’s ways and live lives of compassion and mercy they will enter into the joy of God’s kingdom. In the meantime, they are buffeted about in the brokenness of the world they have chosen where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth – where there are tears, and anger, and fear. Life in God’s kingdom is, always has been, always will be...our choice.

This would be a wonderful lesson learned from this parable but, if this were *all* there was to be learned – that those who do good deeds receive rewards and those who do not do good deeds do not receive rewards – then this would be just another ho-hum morality tale found in many books. This one, though, is found in scripture, it is found in the story of our salvation. This parable we hear today

takes a very curious twist when we discover that the sheep – those welcomed into the fulness of the kingdom – didn't have a clue that, in their compassion toward people in need, they were providing ministry to the Son of Man. Perhaps it is not surprising that the goats didn't realize this – that in their neglect of humanity, they were neglecting the Son of Man – but the sheep? Shouldn't the sheep have known what they were doing? Just exactly who is standing before Jesus being judged?

Both groups were stunned and exclaim, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison?" These people did not know Jesus or the teachings of Jesus. Throughout scripture, when we hear people being called "the nations" it is the people outside of God's chosen people who are being talked about. These people standing before Jesus are the Gentiles, those who do not follow the God of Israel. The *world* will be judged according to whether it did or did not show hospitality to Jesus Christ, the Messiah, clothed not in royal majesty but coming to the world hidden among the "least of these." Who are the "least of these"?

In the king's answer we are told that the least of these are members of his family. Throughout Matthew's Gospel, members of God's family refers to members of the Church community. Matthew is talking to a new and frightened Church facing hatred, even persecution, by the world around them. These words are a comfort to them: they, the Church, and we, the Church, are Christ's presence in the world and the world will be judged on the basis of how it treats the Christian community, on how it receives those sent into the world on behalf of Christ. This does not give us reason for pride and swagger though. We are "the least" not the

“greatest”. We come to the world not in limousines and silk, but hungry and thirsty. We are not the power elite or the moral majority, forcing our will on the nations; we are identified with the weak of the earth and are more likely to be found in hospitals and prisons than in palaces. Indeed, writes Tom Long, “the shock of this parable is that no one – not the goats and not even the sheep – recognized Christ because they assumed that the majestic, triumphant Lord of all time would surely appear as a powerful presence in history. But this is not God’s way in the world” (*Matthew*, p.286). The prophet Isaiah tells us, “He had no form or majesty that we should look at him...He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity” (Is.53:2-3).

The “least of these” is not limited only to members of the Church as we very well know. Jesus says, “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt.12:50). One of our baptismal promises we make is that we will seek and serve Christ in all persons. We are all made of the same clay. The whole world will be judged – the Church included – according to the compassion they show to hungry and hurting people, whoever they may be. The body of Christ is not only in here with us; it is in the suffering and brokenness of the world outside. When we pray we are not just asking *God* to mend the brokenness. We pray in order to hear from God what *we* are meant to do in partnership with God to mend the brokenness. God is already with the poor and the oppressed, the besieged and the broken – God is there calling *us* to join him, to work together. We gather to be sent. The Church is sent out to the world on a vital mission – to tell the world the good news that God’s kingdom is here, the completion is coming. To tell the world, we must *show* the world. We show the world the kingdom by living the life of the kingdom, by living life as Jesus did: a life of mercy,

compassion, forgiveness. These are the good works that show to the world the glory of God. These are the lights we shine in the darkness. Living a life of mercy is the standard on which we will be judged. And this voice of judgement does not come from a lofty place on high but in the suffering of our neighbour. In Matthew's Gospel, if you want to find Jesus, you look among those who are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt.9:36). The faithful Church will be found in exactly the same place.

Christ is waiting.