

29 October 2017

Christ the King



Readings:

Old Testament: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

New Testament: Ephesians 1:15-end

Gospel: Matthew 25:31-end

Today is the last Sunday of the Church's year. The year starts next week with Advent Sunday and then we retell the story of the coming of Jesus, then the story of what it means for him to come to the earth. We then prepare for Easter then celebrate the resurrection. We then celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit and then we work out how to put this teaching into practice, ending with this Sunday, called Christ the King. It is meant to say that the Church begins and ends with Jesus Christ, and all teaching has the purpose, as John teaches, **so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:31)**. I want to say something in the current climate of political uncertainty, about the Christian attitude to politics. The gospel has political implications, for politics is about the way in which we live together as a nation as a community as part of the world family. But the gospel is primarily about Jesus Christ and His rule and reign in our own lives. We have to take the beams out of our own lives before taking the specks out of others, and look first at whether our own lives are truly submitted to the service of Jesus Christ. This does not just apply to politics but to churchmanship, evangelical anglo-catholic, liberal charismatic etc, High church low church, or traditional or modern,; all of these things are interesting and part of how we practice our faith within our own context, but primarily our faith is about making Jesus King of our lives and our living out this truth in the way we love God and the way we love our neighbor. An ambassador is a representative of their ruler abroad. Everything the ambassador does is about representing their country to the country they live in and representing what is going on their host country to their own ruler. St Paul writes **"So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us;" (2 Cor 5:20)** Everything we do or say is representing Christ to the world, and therefore we must ask ourselves, 'is my conduct worthy of my King Jesus.?' For as St. Paul says **"For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake." (2 Cor 4:5)**

Therefore if Christ is our King, then our brothers and sisters in the church are fellow citizens of the Kingdom, and we have an obligation to **"Love one another, as Jesus has loved us" (John 15:12)** the new commandment given by Jesus. In this church in February we had a sermon series on how we treat each other **"be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (Eph 4:32)** In September we had a sermon series on what it is to be a church. So it is entirely appropriate that our final sermon of this Church year is on how we behave towards one another as Christians, and therefore how we come across to others in our witness to the truths of the Christian faith. As Jesus said, **"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the**

house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16) We are therefore ambassadors for Christ, representing Him in our conduct in the full view of the world, who is watching us to see whether this Christianity makes a difference in our lives.

Now let us look together at the passage of scripture from Matthew 25, the famous parable of the sheep and the goats. This passage has inspired many Christians in their witness – saying that wherever we see need and meet it, it is as if we are ministering to Christ. Therefore all men and women are part of our family, and we treat them as we would like to be treated, and especially as if we are being with Jesus.

This ‘parable’ of the sheep and the goats in [Matt 25.31–46](#) is very well known and widely misinterpreted. (It is not actually a parable, since it is not introduced with the typical ‘The kingdom is like...’ and it is not making use of a story from another context, such as farming and economics, to draw out a principle.) It forms one part of the extended teaching about ‘the end’ distinctive to Matthew – it comes after the teaching on the talents, saying that believers will be judged on what they have been given by God and what they have done with it., and parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, are the believers ready for Christ’s return in judgment. It is most commonly interpreted as an injunction to help the poor; most Christians (in the West at least) read this more or less as the sheep being Christians, the goats being non-Christians, and ‘the least of these my brothers [and sisters] being the poor in general. It can be read like that, and in politics and in life in general we must always remember the poor, those less well off than ourselves, and a special concern is for those who do not have a voice that is heard by those in authority and the church must speak up for the poor. But, the three passages in Matthew 25 are not primarily about how Christians behave towards others as if Christians are the knowledgeable ones doing good to those who are ignorant and weak- it is also about Christians’ attitude to service- to Jesus, to the world, but especially towards each other.

- Firstly, Matthew never has Jesus refer to his ‘brothers’ or sisters as anyone other than those who do the will of God by becoming his followers. This is particularly clear in [Matt 12.49](#), when Jesus is rather radically proposing that his new family are the disciples gathered around him (which of course includes women). In John 6, if Jesus wants to say that action to the poor is the primary necessity for following Him, he would have said so, but when the people asked J, **"What must we do to perform the works of God? Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." (John 6:29)** Faith in God, faith in Jesus is primary, why? Because all human action is flawed, and proceeds from motives that are not always Christian, and sometimes actions we think are ‘for others’ are actually about us showing that we are superior to others and ought to be in power over them. We need to submit again and again to the Lordship and Kingship of

Jesus Christ, to purify our motives, so that when we do act it is for the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, and not to put ourselves up and others down.

- Secondly, Jesus is clear that to follow him means to be homeless; in reply to a teacher of the law who would follow him, Jesus replies: 'Foxes have dens, and the birds in the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head' ([Matt 8.20](#) = [Luke 9.58](#)). In other words, if you follow Jesus you will potentially be like him, and this is to be without home, a wandering stranger, reliant on the charity and provision of others. To follow Jesus means giving up your rights to be in control of your life, and to do what He says, as your King. Not all will be called to the itinerant life, but all are called to depend on Jesus and not ourselves. Therefore we have a special duty to those whose task it is to preach and proclaim the gospel in word and deed and to support them financially and emotionally in their work. **Heb 13:7 Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.**" Therefore Churches do not belong to a congregation, they belong first to Jesus Christ who is King, and then the leadership is entrusted to those who God has chosen. To submit to their leadership is to submit to Christ. This does not mean a cult like following, but recognition that leaders are primarily accountable to the King Jesus, who we all submit to. As Paul says, submit to one another, out of reverence for Christ.
- Thirdly, at the end of Jesus' second block of teaching in Matthew) we have a very similar idea—whenever receives the disciples in effect receives Jesus, and how they treat the disciples is in effect how they treat Jesus. France, in his comment on Matt 25, describes this as the closest Matthew gets to a Pauline notion of the believers as the body of Christ, and it is likely that Paul was shaped in this by the words he heard on the Damascus Road. Persecuting Jesus' followers, he hears Jesus ask: 'Why do you persecute *me*?'

Reading the passage in this way (which we must if we take its context in Matthew seriously) has huge implications.

1. **To follow Jesus means (to risk?) being hungry, thirsty, naked, as stranger, sick and in prison.** This has not been hard to imagine for many Christians in many parts of the world in many times in history. In fact, it is perhaps only in a rich West that Christians could have misread this teaching, by naturally reading themselves in the role of the powerful helper rather than the powerless in need of help. If we see ourselves as the powerful helping the weak, we risk the error of the Pharisee and the publican who congratulated himself on how religious he was, and despised the effort of the poor sinner, who was the one justified by God because he alone recognised his sinfulness and need of a saviour's forgiveness.
2. It raises big **questions about the status** of those who don't appear to have named Christ as Lord ([Romans 10.9](#)), but have responded to Christ in being the 'sheep' who have assisted his disciples because they are his disciples.

3. Finally, it suggests a rather **different model for mission**. We are not going as the strong with resources to help the weak, but we come as the weak ready to receive from those to whom we have been sent. And of course this is the idea behind the idea of finding the 'person of peace' who has the goodwill of the area and community on their heart.

When we read the parable again it like this it is very uncomfortable – it is not just about us helping the poor from a position of provision and power, but about us giving ourselves in service of Christ, becoming weak and poor for his sake. As the carol puts it.

**“Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,
All for love’s sake becamest poor;
Thrones for a manger didst surrender,
Sapphire-paved courts for stable floor.
Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,
All for love’s sake becomes poor.**

**Thou who art love beyond all telling,
Saviour and King, we worship thee.
Emmanuel, within us dwelling,
Make us what thou wouldst have us be.
Thou who art love beyond all telling,
Saviour and King, we worship thee.”**

Or as Paul puts it in Phil 2

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, “Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2; 3-11)

Our passages in Matthew 25 are about the final judgment of King Jesus, and the question at the judgment will not be “how many committees did you sit on, how many demonstrations did you go on, what speeches did you give or how much you donated to charity, good though those things are- they are right and proper. But the primary question will be “what did you do with my Son Jesus, how much did you make Him King of your lives?” And then out of that, how did you do what He wanted, how did you follow Him when he said “not my will but your will be done.” If we can

say yes to that, then we also will be saying yes to His new commandment – the way we treat each other within the church, and the way we treat other believers who are about the masters business. When we make Jesus our King, we give up control- we are now citizens of a New King, and He is Lord. For Jesus said.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.' (Matt 7:21-23)

So now, today, make Jesus your King. And if you have done this before, commit yourself again to the Kingship of Jesus, not my will but your will be done. If we do this we will receive the blessedness of the sheep who are at his right side, those who hear, well done good and faithful; servant, come and enjoy your master's happiness.

**Jesus, we enthrone you,
We proclaim You our King.
Standing here in the midst of us,
We raise You up with our praise.
And as we worship, build a throne,
And as we worship, build a throne,
And as we worship, build a throne:
Come, Lord Jesus, and take Your place.**