

Christ the King

Sunday 22nd November 2020

*The annual cycle of the Church's year now ends with the Feast of Christ the King.
The year that begins with the hope of the coming Messiah
ends with the proclamation of his universal sovereignty.*

O Lord, open our lips and our mouth shall proclaim your praise.
Your faithful servants bless you. They make known the glory of your kingdom.

A Song of the New Creation

- 1 'I am the Lord, your Holy One,
the Creator of Israel, your King.'
- 2 Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
- 3 'Remember not the former things,
nor consider the things of old.
- 4 'Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
- 5 'I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
- 6 'The people whom I formed for myself,
that they might declare my praise.' Isaiah 43.15, 16, 18, 19, 20c, 21

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

Gospel Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus said: '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

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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.'

Reflection

The picture we have in front of us in this morning's reading from St Matthew's Gospel is all about judgement, though not necessarily the Last Judgement: who will be the judge and who will be judged; what will be judged; what criteria will the judge use; what will be the outcome of the judgement. That may seem a formidable list of topics to cover in a short space of time and maybe more suitable for a three-volume theological work. But they are important questions for all of us, and perhaps the reading can help us make a start on them. Then we can nibble away at them in our minds over time.

The parable of the talents which Jesus tells just before our reading gives an account of the behaviour of three servants, following their master's generosity to them. Before going away the master gives one servant five talents (a large sum of money), another two talents and the third, one talent. The first two servants put the money to good use and increase it. The third servant buries his one talent in the ground and does nothing with it. The master comes home and judges the actions of his servants. The first two are praised for making good use of what had been given to them. The third servant who simply buried the money, is condemned by the master as lazy and wicked because he did nothing with what he had been given, and the master throws him out. The master judges all three by their actions. What they do is what matters.

Then the story in our reading follows on. It is probably quite familiar to us because of the sheep and the goats. The sheep and the goats are, for some reason or other, quite memorable but they are not the main point of the story. They are simply an example of separating out or distinguishing between two different things, in this case sheep and goats. The animals have to be separated when they come in for the night because sheep can go in an outside pen whereas goats need warmth (so I am told) and need to go inside for shelter.

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And this is where we move towards the question of judgement, the who and why and when. And judgement is critical to the well-being of the whole world. Good and bad, right and wrong need to be recognised, separated out, and judged, put in their right place, as it were.

When this happens, justice is done and the world is brought back into balance. And most of us long for a world where there is justice and fairness for all: no more exploitation, poverty, inequalities of many kinds, and mindless cruelties. Christians believe that it is Jesus who is the Judge of the world. He came into the world not only to bring salvation and forgiveness, but also to bring in God's rule of justice, God's kingdom.

Like the people who trudged the dusty roads of The Holy Land with Jesus, we today are now his followers. We are the people, the subjects of Jesus the King, in every corner of the world. And the example he sets for all to follow is one of love for one's neighbour, whoever they may be, practical service to the needy, acts of simple, self-effacing charity, self-giving love for his sake. So, as his followers, we should expect to receive not only his gift of the justice for which we long, but also his judgement. Matthew tells us that Jesus, King and Judge, will reject those who gave him nothing to eat when he was hungry, nothing to drink when he was thirsty, no welcome when he was a stranger, no clothes when he was naked, no help when he was sick or in prison. "When you didn't do it for the least significant of my brothers and sisters you didn't do it for me" says Jesus (25:45). His judgement on our actions should be part of our thinking throughout our lives. It should prepare us for the final judgement, when he will come at the Last Judgement at the end of time.

After his teaching to help and encourage his followers, Jesus began the journey to Jerusalem and the Cross, living out his own teaching to the very last drop of his blood. And there is encouragement for us in both his teaching and his example. He lived, suffered, died and came back to new life for us, to advance the coming of the Kingdom of God, to bring in salvation and justice. As we look across into every part of the world, we can see so clearly how much it stands in need of Jesus, our Judge and King, and of those who follow him faithfully to the end.

Prayers

Collect for Christ the King

Eternal Father, whose Son Jesus Christ ascended to the throne of heaven that he might rule over all things as Lord and King:
keep the Church in the unity of the Spirit and in the bond of peace,
and bring the whole created order to worship at his feet;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

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Almighty God, ruler of all creation, we pray for all those in positions of power, that they may govern with wisdom and integrity, serving the needs of their people.

We pray for the Church, the sign of your reign, that it may extend your welcome to people of every race and background. Particularly we bring before you our Archbishop Justin and Bishop Stephen as they carry the heavy burden of leadership in extremely difficult times.

We pray for this community of faith, that attentive to your word we may always worship in spirit and in truth.

We pray for those who are ill, those who are struggling with physical disabilities, and those who find the isolation of being in lockdown unbearable.

Loving God, you have taught us that the power of the heart is greater than the power of wealth and might.
Hear us as we pray for the fulfilment of your reign.
We ask this through Jesus Christ our King;
to him be glory and power for ever. Amen.

Stir up, O Lord, the wills of your faithful people;
that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works,
may by you be plenteously rewarded;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, ever more. Amen