

Christ the King 2020 22nd Nov 2020

Matthew 25:31-46

Contemplatio

Today's gospel is the third of three parables of judgement towards the end of Matthew's gospel and brings us to the end of the church year, the festival of Christ the King.

Over the last couple of weeks I've been exploring the theme that when we fail to comprehend the gratuitous and expansive and unconditional love of God in Christ, and instead project our fears and images of God onto God, we end up in a self-imposed outer darkness of weeping and gnashing of teeth, while blaming God for putting us there. In the first parable the foolish bridesmaids go off shopping for oil and miss the wedding banquet. In the second parable, the third slave incorrectly associates God with the hard task masters of this world and as a result buries his love in the ground rather than giving it away in imitation of the *real* God's abundant generosity.

This third parable is sometimes called the 'parable of the judgement of the nations'. Well it kind of IS but it also kind of ISN'T. Being a parable it's typically richer than a first reading. In Christian tradition, the final judgement of the cosmos occurs on the cross, where it is sin and death which are judged and defeated. Like I said last week, this helps to clarify our image of God. The *King* in this parable sitting on the throne of glory is the *crucified Jesus*. The cross is the lens *through which* we read everything else in the Bible. So how does the cross help us to hear this parable of the judgement of the nations?

I said last week that our God image is important because we tend to imitate, in our own lives, the God we worship. The parable draws Jewish apocalyptic thinking [the reference to the Son of Man coming from the Book of Daniel]. In apocalyptic thought, it was expected that there was a coming new age in which all sin and suffering would be wiped away, giving rise to a new age with a renewed earth under a Davidic King. In making this transition from the old age to the new age, God would punish the wicked in fire and reward the righteous.

The parable takes this traditional apocalyptic language but subverts it in light of the death and resurrection of Christ which had, of course, already occurred 40 or so years before the gospel is written. There is a largely Jewish Christian community (that is, they are Jews who confessed Jesus as the Messiah) and they are taking Apocalyptic language of their Jewish tradition and doing something new with it.

The parable is holding up a picture of what is really important to God – God's criteria for judgement if you like. So it becomes a question to us about our lives and how we focus on what is important. What is of ultimate importance is not how much success

we have had, or how much power, or how much glory in human eyes, but how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the outsider, the sick, the prisoner...AND that we won't even know that we have done that to Christ so we did it simply out of compassion rather than expecting to get a Christian reward.

The revelation of God in this parable is found in the poor and the vulnerable – in the victims of this world – those whose vocation it always was for the Jews to care for – and we find that consistently in the Jewish scriptures. So when the Jews here that they go – ‘yeah, that’s right – that’s what our nation was called to’.

It’s worth noting that it’s not individuals who are being judged here – it is whole nations. This is big picture stuff. Does our NATION create conditions for caring for caring for the most vulnerable, or not? Look at what is happening in the United States at the moment. Thousands of vulnerable people a day are being sacrificed on the altar of political egos. Rather than scapegoat individual politicians we need to be asking what, as Hamlet said, is ‘sick in the state of Denmark’.

The parable undercuts traditional apocalyptic because the King who is judging is judging from a cross. The other thing that we need to do with parables in light of the cross is that we need to adjust our view of time. From the perspective the cross, all time is NOW – this very moment. We live under the illusion of time as something that extends from point A to point B. But of course God stands outside space and time. The crisis of the cross is always occurring in this present moment (I hope I am blowing my minds here – that is my intention)

So when we read a parable of judgement (or anything else in the Bible for that matter), it always confronts us in this present moment. The judgement is not about something that WILL happen at some point in the future. The “Life of the Age” (25:46) is only ever right now. In every hospital on the planet at this moment the Crucified King is saying to over-worked health care workers, *‘come, blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the cosmos’*.

And to others, the Crucified King is saying, ‘Go from me execrable ones, into the fire of the age’. Although some appalling images of eternal hellfire for the damned have been conjured up in the history of the church, the original Greek which is typically translated ‘eternal fire’ should be more accurately translated, ‘the fire of the age’. The ‘age’ [‘aionion’ in verse 25:41 and 25:46] is the ‘new age’ which is seen, in our human timeline, with Jesus of Nazareth, but which is eternally *now* from God’s perspective. God is, was, and always shall be like Jesus. We ought to read judgement less in terms of a threat about what will happen to us at some point in the future if we don’t do things right, and more as a crisis of decision in the present moment. How am I going to respond to the purifying fire of God’s love RIGHT NOW as I listen to this parable?

David Bentley Hart takes the Greek word ‘*Kolasis*’ in verse 46, which is typically translated as ‘punishment’ and says it should be translated ‘chastisement’ or ‘correction’ or ‘pruning’ (‘Chastening of that Age’). The sense of judgement is that

those who did not serve the poor, and so serve Christ, are *purified* in the fire of love - '*chastened*' in order to ultimately be united to God when God will, as St Paul says, be '*all and in all*' (1 Cor.15:28). In fact, the purifying fire may well be to come face to face with Christ, the victim of our own violence. St Paul captures this in 1st Corinthians 3:15 where he says, "*if anyone's work should be burned away, he will suffer loss [perhaps the loss of our selfish ego], yet he shall be saved, though so as by fire*". In the end, the gospel says, ALL things will be reconciled to God (Colossians 1:20). Nothing and no one will be lost in the divine economy (Romans 8:31ff) but there might be a fair bit of weeping and gnashing of teeth as our petty egos are stripped away.

Who is close to the heart of God? the stranger, the naked, the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the prisoner....and might I say, increasingly these days, the planet itself. In the midst of these threats we are, according to the Letter to the Ephesians (1:17-23) offered the '*immeasurable greatness of God's power*' – the power of God's Spirit which raised Jesus from the dead – to actually DO something about the crisis we face. Don't defer. Hear the word of loving judgement *today* and respond accordingly.

The Lord be with you.