

Pentecost 24

Christ the King or The Reign of Christ

Ezekiel 34 11-24 ; Psalm 100; Eph 1 15-23; **Matt 25 31-46**

Today on this last day of Pentecost we celebrate "The Reign of Christ", which used to be called "Christ the King".

The festival was first instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius IX. Over time it has become an ecumenical observance.

Jesus is called "King" because He is Lord over our lives and is understood to protect us and guide us. In the Gospel reading today, he refers to himself in the third person as "the king".

Being a nation where the republican spirit is strong, this feast, and the imagery of royalty, may not sit as comfortably in Australia as it does in the UK.

Focusing on the Gospel reading is perhaps no less uncomfortable: Jesus tells what has been called The Parable of the Last Judgment or the Sheep and the Goats. The story would make a wonderful Monty Python sketch called "*Whose right?*" or "*My left or your left?*"

The righteous are directed to the right and the unrighteous to the left. I am sensitive to this association between the left and unrighteousness because I am left-handed.

The left hand in Middle Eastern culture was the "unclean" hand that people used to do their toilet, while the right hand was the "clean" hand with which they ate. The goats on the "unclean" left is not where you wanted to be; a contextual detail we can miss because it is not part of our culture.

Despite their different fates, the sheep and goats have 2 things in:

They have the same response:

“Lord, when was it we saw you hungry ...?” They are surprised by what is important to God, by the divine standards of judgement, which are not what they expected.

They are surprised by Grace.

In other words, the judgement is **not** based on doing the right things for Jesus, or to Jesus. Of course we would do all those things if we knew it was Jesus. Wouldn't we?

Returning to the script of my Monty Python sketch – I can hear John Cleese saying: “But Lord if you'd only told us it was You we would have opened up the front parlour where we entertain the Rector when s/he comes, we'd have got out the best china. If only we'd known!”

Today's reading from Matthew gives us no excuse to say: “But Lord, we didn't know”.

Judgement is not based on doing the right things for Jesus.

Fortunately... or unfortunately, the judgement is based on doing the right things for the dispossessed, acts of compassion for those in need. This is not rocket science; all it requires is common sense and human decency. And we all have that... don't we?

At the heart of what the goats in this story did is a simple truth: **Nothing**. They did nothing, perhaps giving us pause to consider our acts of omission instead of those of commission that have featured so prominently in traditional understandings of “sin”.

The goats weren't sinners in the conventional sense of doing bad things, they just didn't do anything when they saw their sisters and brothers suffering and could have helped.

Jesus paints an apocalyptic scene: A huge, dramatic event with all the nations and all the angels and the Son of Man coming in glory and sitting on a throne. He does not draw our focus up, towards all this glory, but downwards. He shines a spotlight on the very thing, the down-to-earth thing, that he did throughout his teaching ministry: He noticed people's need, and he responded. In this spiritual practice, he was a good and faithful Jew.

He observed the tradition and laws of his faith, which provided for the care of those who were suffering or in need i.e. **hospitality**. This was – and still is – to be extended to strangers, widows, orphans and those in need as a foundational principle of Judaism. Hospitality was, and is, much more important in other cultures than it is in Anglocentric circles.

If we look for Christ the King of Scripture we do not find him at the centre of power and privilege, but among the poor and marginalised of his day: Women, tax collectors, shepherds, former prostitutes, fishermen and social and political activists. This poses a considerable challenge to us as privileged middle-class people.

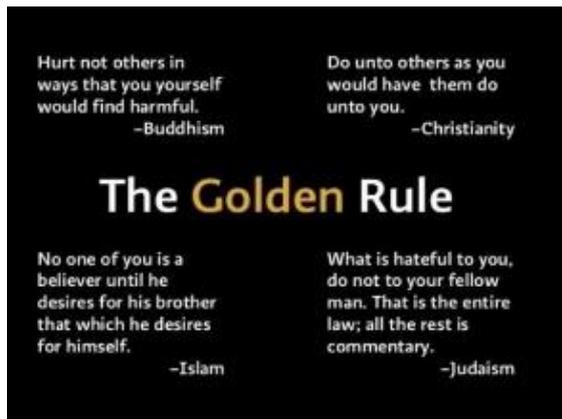
If you don't think you are privileged, consider this: According to a *Time* magazine statistic, only 0,01% of the world's population is wealthy enough to buy books. As a book-buying community, I suggest that puts us firmly among the privileged, the potential goats.

Once commentator notes: "...the criteria used for separating the honourable from the dishonourable have to do with how the wealthy and privileged respond to the needs of the dispossessed."*

That is pause for thought as in its description of the Reign of Christ, this parable tells us what it is that matters to God: What we do or fail to do for "one of the least of these", as all of God's children deserve our compassion and generosity.

In these challenging times of virus-induced hardship, we know that many people are suffering: "Shut-ins", migrant workers, visa-holders, international students, the retrenched, young people, unemployed and under-employed. We do not need to look very far to find someone who could be "one of the least of these".

The imperative to respond to the need of others is at the core of all true religion, which is the flip side of the coin called the *Golden Rule*, of which I spoke two Sundays ago: "Do to others as you would have them do to you."



The commentator continues: "Christ's message of hospitality to the strangers among us is crucial to our national health. Jesus is fundamentally interested in systemic institutional commitment to the stranger, and he commands whole nations to treat those on the margins of life with dignity and love. How we as a nation help those who are poor, infirm, imprisoned and otherwise estranged determines what our ultimate judgment will be."*

Confronting words, perhaps, given the way the Australian state treats Aboriginal people, refugees, immigrants and asylum-seekers.

This text challenges us not to define ourselves as religious or spiritual because we go to church and pray and occasionally, contribute to a worthy cause or volunteer some of our time to help others. Jesus' words illustrate the true religion that transforms lives, daring us to open our eyes to encounter the sacred in the our everyday, including the sacred in others. Sometimes the hardest thing is to see the image of God in one another.

It's not only how we behave in Jesus' presence that counts, but in everyday encounters with others, even when that relationship is unlikely, momentary, or sad. We are called to look at each other and see Christ.

It is as simple, and as hard, as that, as Michael Leunig illustrates:

Love one another and you will be happy.
It's as simple and difficult as that.
There is no other way.



We have come to the end of another liturgical year; next Sunday is Advent, the start of a new year. What could be more surprising than a God who comes to dwell with us in the form of a poor, helpless child born in obscurity to peasant parents?

Today's Gospel passage and Advent next Sunday remind us of our God who came to us as "one of the least of these" -- and a God who still does. **Amen**

References

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