

“To The Least Of These” – Mat 25:31-46

Well, we made it ... to the end of the Church Year at least! Next week we begin the Season of Advent, the four Sundays leading up to Christmas. In the church year, reflected in the lectionary readings, today marks the festival of what used to be called Christ the King but is now more commonly referred to as the Reign of Christ, the Sunday that ends not only the Season of Pentecost but also the entire church liturgical year.

To wrap up the year we have a reading from Matthew's gospel in which Jesus concludes his public instruction. Noting the principle of end stress (saving the best and most important for last) is likely at work here we can conclude that Matthew wants this instruction to be the lingering lesson in his readers' ears. These verses have no parallel in either Mark or Luke's gospels but are connected instead with the throne scene in Revelation and with the Son of Man passages in the book of Daniel in the Old Testament.

Unlike our readings of the past few weeks, this text is not a parable but an apocalyptic vision of the last judgment. 'Apocalyptic' relates to the 'end times', a subject that never fails to inspire unlimited creative speculation and vivid imaging, not to mention a great deal of fear mongering. However, the purpose of presenting the vision here is neither speculation about the ghastly details of the end of the world as we know it, nor intention to feed the fascination of the community. This vision is not so much about a description of the end of things as it is a means for ethical instruction, for teaching about the basics of 'right' and 'wrong'.

The heart of the vision is the parousia, the coming of the Son of Man. I think we all can relate to the normal Hollywood or TV images of a huge and imposing figure, clothed in a flowing white robe and with a magnificent beard, riding in on puffy clouds like some kind of celestial snow-boarder. As a word of caution I would like to point out that there are no such details here in the text! True, Matthew has previously given us some of those kinds of images: the coming will be "as sudden as the lightning (24:27)", it "will be on clouds of glory and with great power (24:30-31)", the day and hour are unknown (24:36-42), it will sneak up on people like a burglar in the night (24:43), and it will be a time of reckoning and woe to the unprepared (24:45-51). Three previous parables have dealt with the thorny issue of why the coming has been delayed but now comes the full vision, glorious in appearance, cosmic in scope, and yet personal in that every life must appear before the judgment seat.

But here, however, "in his glory", and "all the angels with him" is as close as the vision gets to describing the Son of Man. And as for his coming, he doesn't so much come to earth but ascends instead to the throne in heavenly glory. Note carefully - this is not "The End" ... this is not a scene about the final destruction of earth; it is instead a coronation scene with the Son of Man being installed as King and ultimate Judge (note how the language shifts – the term "Son of Man" appears only in the opening verse, and is replaced by "King" in subsequent references). You may recall the fiftieth anniversary reruns of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II – shucks, some of us can remember the original! – scenes of great pomp and circumstance as befits the crowning of a monarch. It would be difficult to find words and ways to describe the coronation of Christ as King upon the heavenly throne, although John does well in his Revelation and poets, painters and sculptors have spent their lives trying to express their awe over the years. Matthew spares only a few words to convey the magnificence and glory of the event, and then moves quickly on to convey what is really important.

And what is it that is so important? First of all, what is at the heart of this instruction, what is really important, is the understanding that at some point there will come a day of reckoning, there will come a time of final judgment when all the nations, when all people will

stand before the heavenly King and be sorted into one of two lines. Old Testament language of sheep and goats being separated evokes powerful images of that judgment process and outcome. The sheep, spiritual offspring of the Lamb of God, are directed to the position of honour at the right hand of the heavenly King, while the goats are shunted off to the lesser left-hand side. But even more powerful and important than the images is the underlying proclamation that a day of judgment will come. A final judging and separation is the most profoundly important message of all, isn't it?

That message is profoundly important because judgment puts meaning to life. The realization that at some point we all will be called to account for our behaviour provides a powerful incentive to avoid certain behaviours but even more importantly provides the understanding that there is a cosmic value system, that there is absolute good, that there is both a call to demonstrate that goodness and a reward for doing so. Without a final exam in life we would be left to wander and wonder if what we are doing has any meaning at all. Without such a clear picture of being measured we would be left without purpose, or direction, or meaning.

While we may not be surprised to be told that there will be a final reckoning for our actions, I suspect we are once again surprised to hear the basis on which that judgment will be pronounced. Indeed, Jesus himself proclaims here that many if not all will be surprised. The first surprise is that the basis, the criteria for being judged is not some unattainable mystic spirituality but instead the most basic and simple of actions, one's response to human need. These needs are not unusual. They are the essence, the foundational part of the normal coming and going of everyday life. We have such a tendency to make our faith complicated, to shore it up with churchy trappings and solemn rituals, to try to lift our faith up out of the ordinary and profane in an attempt to set it upon a pedestal, believing we are enhancing the holiness of both our faith and ourselves.

Jesus speaks time and time against those attempts, and tries to draw us back to earth, back into the lives of people where he himself walked. We do this even with our Sacrament of Communion; in attempting to acknowledge the holiness of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit in observing that sacrament, we often forget that the original "last supper" was far closer to a farm kitchen meal or more likely a tavern dinner than it was to a high altar ritual. We see many times in the gospels Jesus at least as comfortable at a dinner table in a sinner's house as he was in the company of religious leaders. And here, where he is providing a final instruction, he once again affirms that what is really important is how we conduct ourselves and express our faith in ordinary actions, relating to ordinary people, in ordinary situations in life.

The second surprise is shared by both those who find themselves ultimately put into the place of honour and those who find themselves 'misplaced'. Can't you just picture the scene, with many old goats being shuffled along, protesting, "but, but, there must be some mistake ... I'm supposed to be in the other line!" Can't you hear the righteous indignation of others protesting that they had prophesied, they had cast out demons and had performed miracles, and that they surely had earned a right to be in the other line, protesting so loudly that they still could not hear the soft voice of the Lamb upon the Throne saying sadly, "I knew you not"?

But set against their surprise is the tender picture of those who are surprised to find themselves welcomed into the line headed for the place of honour. It's a beautiful portrait of those saints whose service to others is so much a part of their behaviour that they are embarrassed at the recital of their deeds and amazed that their simple actions were considered service to Christ. Saints who are surprised to be reminded that nothing is more religious than attending to those who need care. Like so much of our faith the concept is simple, too simple to

be accepted and believed, and thus too difficult to put into practice. So simple that we feel compelled to add layers of artificial behaviour, until the basic concept is finally lost amid the glitter. This final instruction from Jesus is meant as a chisel to chip away all those accretions and reveal once again the foundational message of God's love and compassion, of his call to live our lives demonstrating in constant daily routine actions that same love for others.

It's a frightening idea that we will someday be called to account for who we are and how we have behaved, especially towards strangers, but it does help to clarify what's really important in our faith. At the same time we have both an increased responsibility to 'do good' since we hear again what it means to 'do good', and the opportunity to put our refreshed understanding into practice. Being aware of that end point underscores what's really important – living out the love and compassion God has for us in our unselfish service to others, especially to "the least of these."

Again, what an appropriate text with which to finish the church year, isn't it? As we stand on the brink of a new Advent it is good to remember back to the last Advent, to the beginning of this church year, to be called by this text to a review of all that has happened, to use this opportunity to examine our actions and our motivations against what Jesus defines here as really important. Not to judge others, for that is never our role, but an opportunity to quietly examine ourselves. What a grand opportunity we have to hear, to listen, to pray that we can grasp the spirit of this message, to be filled with the spirit of God's love in Christ. May God grant us his grace to live out that love in eager anticipation of hearing from the Lamb on the Throne, "well done, good and faithful servant".