

## The Reign of Christ ~ November 26, 2017

**Readings:** Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 ~ Psalm 100 ~ Matthew 25: 11-46

The 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's gospel does not make for good bed time reading and it doesn't seem to have a whole lot in common with the good news of Jesus Christ. It begins with one group of 'wise' bridesmaids refusing to share their lamp oil. Not a whole lot of compassion going on there... The guy who buries his one talent to keep it safe ends up gnashing his teeth in the outer darkness. That's just sad. In today's parable, the poor goats get eternal punishment for some thing they weren't even aware they'd failed to do. That seems a bit unfair.

What's missing in this whole chapter is God's trademark love, grace and mercy that are so prevalent throughout the rest of scripture. Also absent is any opportunity for forgiveness, healing and reconciliation – the hallmarks of the ministry of the Jesus we know and love. It's like Matthew's cold-hearted Jesus says, *You had your chance to do right and you missed it. Time's up. Too bad.* Where is the good news in that?

Well, the concept of the judgement of the nations is based in the ancient belief that God will, one day, intervene in human history to right the wrongs and bring divine justice to the world. On that day, everyone will be held accountable for his or her own actions and judged accordingly. It's a sobering thought, but the concept of Judgement Day was originally meant to be good news for the downtrodden.

In our first reading, the promise of divine judgement comes *as an oracle of hope* to a people living in exile in Babylon. In this prophecy, God's judgement falls, not on Babylon, but on the former leaders of Israel; those kings who misused their power and misled the people for personal gain.

To these *fat and strong sheep*, God promises a diet of justice, something the greedy will find quite distasteful. But to the lean sheep – the disadvantaged – God promises rescue, food, healing, strength and good leaders. Its a word of hope to sustain them through the exile.

What brings us up short in today's gospel is that the basis of Jesus' final judgement. How often have we been told that salvation comes not by good works, but by faith alone? Yet today's message is that the judgement to come is not based on any particular confession of faith, but according to the compassion we show to others, especially the poor and the weak. In today's gospel, nothing else is required. And in a disturbing kind of way this makes sense.

In our baptismal vows we promise to seek and serve Christ in all people, loving our neighbour as ourselves. So, whenever we show or withhold compassion to the hungry, the homeless, the outcast, we do so to Jesus because he's right there, with them.

The writer of Matthew's gospel makes it very clear that any faith that does not inspire good works is deficient for true faith bears the fruit of compassion. Jesus does not pass judgement on the goats for something they've done. The goats hadn't done anything bad...there is no evidence of malice ...they simply neglected to help people in need.

Now this can be a bit disturbing considering the world we live in. Who among us has never walked by a homeless person who is panhandling? If we help 1 or 2 but walk by others does that make us sheep or goats? That's the thing with parables: you can take them too far.

The very purpose of today's parable is to shake us out of complacency; to awaken in us a concern for the needs of our world. Why is it so important? Because, to quote Teresa of Avila, *Christ has no hands and feet, but ours to show compassion on the world*. What's required is faith that leads to acts of compassion in the trenches of everyday life.

The one flicker of hope for the goats is that the day of judgement has not yet arrived. So there is still time for people to get on board and practice a little compassion – a little caring – to the least of these; which is where you'll find Jesus hanging out most of the time. Earlier this week I heard of a young preacher who decided to add a bit to the parable by having the sheep show compassion by crossing over to help the goats find their way.

One thing we know is that being part of a faith community provides us with all sorts of opportunities to help those less fortunate. Last week we talked about the success of using our time, talent and treasure to create a home for our Syrian family. And a whole lot of people continue to help them settle into life in Canada. And there are moments in there that give us glimpse of God's idea of the kingdom. For instance, when an interpreter wearing a hijab got together with a female Anglican priest in her collar to help the government worker get our Roman Catholic refugee family their social insurance numbers. Cooperation and compassion work well together in the kingdom of God.

Thanks to your generosity with your time, talents and treasure this church is able to do some amazing ministry and make a difference in the lives of others. People are already signing up to join us for Christmas Dinner.

As Jean Vanier writes, *When a community lets itself be guided in its growth by the cries of the poor and their needs it will walk in the dessert and it will be insecure. But it is assured of the promised land – not the one of security but the one of peace and love. And it will be a community that is always alive.*

Let us pray.

Gracious God, as we fumble our way through these difficult times, help us to remember that we have promised to be your hands and feet, your eyes, ears and voice. Inspire us to always lead with compassion and to speak out for those who have no voice. When we stand before our king may we not be found wanting when there is so much we can do, in his name, Amen.