

Sunday before Advent (26<sup>th</sup> November 2023) – Christ the King!

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 and Matthew 25:31-46

We've reached the end of Matthew's gospel, as far as the church calendar is concerned. Today we celebrate Christ the King – God's ultimate purpose fulfilled. This is what Matthew, in this Gospel, has been building up to.

The Gospel passage we've just heard is the end of what is a fairly long section and the last public teaching of Jesus; this included the Parable of the Ten Young Women (and their oil lamps), and the Parable of the Talents. These previous parables cause us to reflect on how we wait for the end times and how we make the right preparations so that we are fully prepared.

So, to today's passage. Instead of saying 'the kingdom of heaven is like', which is how Jesus starts many of his parables, he tells us how it will be when the kingdom of heaven arrives:

'When the Son of Man comes in his glory,  
and all his angels with him,  
then he will sit on the throne of his glory.'

We usually picture or imagine Jesus, the Son of Man, in human form, don't we? Jesus as son of God, initially as a baby, then a child, then a man, very human and we can identify with him. But we're told here that the Son of Man, this is how Jesus likes to call himself, he will take his rightful place on the throne as Christ the King.

Earlier this year, back in May, there was the coronation of King Charles, a magnificent occasion with tremendous pomp and ceremony. But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and his angels with him, well there will be no comparison whatsoever.

Not only will Jesus come in glory, blazing in beauty, but he will also have his angels with him – not just a small entourage of angels – Revelation 5 says there will be angels numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. That's at least a hundred million angels!

And, what's more, we are all invited! 'All the nations will be gathered before him.' Not just representatives of governments and royal families, not just the rich and the famous. We'll all be gathered before Christ the King! Jesus on his throne, 100 million angels, all the nations before him. What an incredible scene!

Are you ready for this? Are your oil lamps trimmed? Are you making the best of the talents, the gifts that God has given you, for the service of others? I must ask myself this too, am I ready?

And are you ready for what will happen next? That is, when we are all gathered 'he will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left.'

Jesus tells the people why he has put some on his right, and the others on his left. Let's consider their responses to what Jesus says to them.

But before this, I have a sort of confession to make. I was in London last Tuesday for a meeting. Afterwards, I travelled back to Paddington on the underground. Everyone was sitting, minding their own business, not talking to each other.

About halfway through the journey, a young woman came along the carriage, possibly eastern European, and heavily pregnant. She was wearing a "Baby on board" badge. But she wasn't looking for a seat; the train wasn't full. She was clutching a used coffee cup and asking, in poor English, for any loose change to help feed her family.

As I said, everyone was sitting, minding their own business, not talking to each other, and now also not making eye-contact with either the young woman or each other. One or two people did put some coins in her cup; I didn't have any coins and mouthed "Sorry". Afterwards, I realised that I had some notes in my back pocket; but it was too late.

What struck me most was not the lack of compassion or the lack of generosity, including from me, but how nobody was looking at her, nobody was making eye contact. It was as if she wasn't there. And, if we hadn't seen her, then, in our minds eye, she nor her issues didn't exist.

That incident came back to me when I read the responses from the people that Jesus has put on his right and his left.

Those on his right said, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and give you food, or thirsty and give you something to drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothing? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'

Those on his left said, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'

It's interesting that neither group of people see Jesus in the way he described. But Jesus himself is identifying with those who are hungry, thirsty, and so on. Jesus was saying that when we feed one of those, it is as though we are feeding him.

What about us? There is a danger that we become blind to other peoples' needs, either those around us or those far away. With so many needs around us, if we're not careful, we become indifferent and don't see them anymore.

Avoiding indifference requires an active effort on our part to see, to pay attention, to be compassionate and to express caring. It may be as simple as saying hello to a stranger, supporting the food bank, buying the Big Issue, giving to aid charities, buying Fair Trade goods, visiting someone alone at home or unwell in hospital, putting a coin (or even a £5 note) in someone's cup.

One day we will be gathered before Christ the King. We have a king who rules with compassion. As Christ's disciples, are we paying attention to his teaching? Do we see people as Jesus sees them? While we have the chance, let's each do something about it.

Amen

(James Parsons)