

Ezekiel 34 11-24

Psalm 23

1 Cor 15 20-28

Matt 25 31-46

Christ the King or The Reign of Christ

Today we celebrate on this last day of Pentecost before Christmas "THE REIGN OF CHRIST", used to be called "CHRIST THE KING".

Reign of Christ (or Christ the King) Sunday was first instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius IX. Over time it has become an ecumenical observance.

We call Jesus "King" because He is Lord over our lives. He protects us and guides us.

Gospel reading today Jesus tells the parable of the last judgment, in which that momentous decision is based simply on acts of compassion for those in need.

Righteous – right unrighteous – left. Would make a wonderful Monty Python sketch called "Whose right?" or "My left or your left?"

Sensitive to matters of the left because I am left handed.

Left hand in Middle Eastern culture – unclean hand that people used to do their toilet, right hand was clean hand they ate with. So goats on the left associated with the unclean – not where you wanted to be. We can miss this contextual detail of the significance to the goats on the left because not part of our culture.

As our King and Sovereign, Jesus calls us to honour him and give him our allegiance. In yet another piece of divinely ironic contradiction, the one enthroned is also the one who takes the role of the servant and washes feet, and wears a crown of thorns. His concern for the outcast and wounded is in keeping with the actions of the shepherd in Ezekiel as read for us by Callum.

Sheep and goats have 2 things in common despite very different fates:

BOTH those judged to be honourable and those judged to be dishonourable have exactly 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, not what they expected. They are surprised by Grace.

In other words, the judgement is **NOT** based on doing the right things to Jesus or for 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 – 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 Vicar when 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 just doing the right things for the dispossessed. 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 weren't sinners in the conventional sense of doing bad things, like sexual offences or stealing or even murder. They just didn't do anything when they saw their sisters and brothers suffering. In the apocalyptic scene he paints, 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, Jesus draws our focus not up, at towards all this glory, but down, on the very thing, the down-to-earth thing, that he did throughout his teaching ministry: he noticed people in their 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 recently had the privilege of interviewing ++ (Archbishop) Thabo. I am a cynical journo, do not impress easily –I was seriously impressed. I

questioned him about a wide range of topical issues in church and society:

Church and politics, Homosexuality, transformation of church what it should look like, Julius Malema, service delivery and corruption, Press Freedom Commission, apartheid reparations and climate change and COP17.

Constant theme running through his discourse was social justice. God's preferential option for poor, dispossessed, the marginalised, the 'other'. The attitudes and behaviours of the sheep, both individually and corporately as church and as a society.

If we look for Christ the King of Scripture we do not find him at centre of power, privilege, but among the poor 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: put up your hand if bought a book in the last year: According to *Time* magazine stat, only 0,01% world population wealthy enough to do that. 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.' **SIMPLE.**

If take theme of the Reign of Christ, this parable tells us about nature of the reign of Christ/kingdom of God – tells us what it is that matters to God. Those kinds of themes also kept cropping up in ++Thabo's words: we as individuals and a nation should be living in a particular way moulded by what Scripture tells us about the kingdom and kingdom people.

In this Jesus talks about what we do or fail to do for 'one of the least of these brothers of mine' or 'one of the least of these'.

Want to mention 2 particular interpretations of just who 'one of the least of these brothers of mine' refers to:

1. Scholars suggest that one reading of the text is understand it as showing that the Gentiles ("the nations") will be judged on how they receive the Christian missionaries Jesus will send out three chapters after this one. In this interpretation, "the little ones" are those who have nothing but the shirt on their back and the Good News to share.

2. Other scholars support a reading that sees all of God's children as deserving of our compassion and generosity. One scholar notes the difference between lovingkindness, extended to family and friends (which is presumably easier), and the more difficult **hospitality**, which was extended to strangers, widows, orphans, those in need like3 angels Abraham [Ge 18] entertained and the traveller beaten up in story of Good Samaritan. Hospitality, so much more important in that culture than our own. Was a foundational principle of Judaism in both OT and NT and still is.

Hospitality of God could be said to be at heart of our parish mission statement:

Corepurpose: inspire and nurture friendship with God and each other; in that our **long-term vision** is to be a vibrant church of choice drawing people from all demographic sectors of the wider community.

i.e. no matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

The imperative to respond to the need of others is at the core of all true religion (and was in fact part of many ancient cultures and religions).

One commentator wrote [James E. Brenneman]: "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."

In that I hear echoes of ++ Thabo's voice:

He said "We cannot privatise faith". It's a great temptation because difficult as it is to understand this text as instruction for our personal, "private" spiritual lives, it's still easier than applying its core message to our public, shared life.

This text challenges us, not to define ourselves as religious or spiritual because we go to church and pray and occasionally make a contribution to a worthy cause or volunteer some of our time to help others. The words of Jesus illustrate true religion that transforms our lives, opening our eyes to encounter the sacred in our everyday lives, 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 Jesus said, and God will say "How we behaved when we thought God was not around." In everyday encounters with others, all children of God, 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.

We have come to the end of another liturgical year; next Sunday is Advent, 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 Advent next Sunday remind us of our God who came to us as 'one of the least of these'; 'one of the least of these brothers of mine' --and a God who still does".

A MEDITATION: (by Mother Teresa of Calcutta 1910-1997)

When I was hungry, you gave me to eat,
When I was thirsty, you gave me to drink.

When I was homeless, you opened your doors,
When I was naked, you gave me your coat.

When I was weary, you helped me find rest,
When I was anxious, you calmed all my fears.

When I was little, you taught me to read,
When I was lonely, you gave me your love.

When in a prison, you came to my cell,
When on a sick bed, you cared for my needs.

In a strange country, you made me at home,
Seeking employment, you found me a job.

Hurt in a battle, you bound up my wounds,
Searching for kindness, you held out your hand.

When I was Black, or Chinese, or White,
Mocked and insulted, you carried my cross.

When I was aged, you bothered to smile,
When I was restless, you listened and cared.

You saw me covered with spittle and blood,
You knew my features, though grimy with sweat.

When I was laughed at, you stood by my side,
When I was happy, you shared in my joy.

"I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it for me."