

## Christ the King Sunday – Last Sunday after Pentecost

### Matthew 25:31-46

It may not feel like it, but today is the equivalent of New Year's Eve in terms of the Church year. Next Sunday is advent 1 and the start of a new church year. So just like the New Year's eve celebrations we share on 31<sup>st</sup> December, this time for Christians is a time for reflecting on what has gone before and looking forward to what will lie ahead for us. But don't worry, we don't have to stay up really late to see the new year in!

Our readings this morning are all concerned with the imagery of sheep and the sense of being a part of God's flock and what that means. The prophet gives us a glimpse of what Jesus would regularly preach, that God actively looks for the sheep of his flock to draw them home and keep them together. What a comfort! When we get lost we are not left rudderless in our attempt to steer home, God is actively mounting a rescue mission and is looking for us, calling us, and we can be sure God does this not for us alone but for all who are his and stray.

But the gospel reading reminds us that not all people are God's sheep, not even all who are drawn to him are his sheep. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, none of those being judged by Christ know who amongst them is a member of that flock. The Lord separates the group, some on each side, and names those on the right the sheep and those on the left the goats.

And even when Jesus says to the sheep, welcome, you are home because you have shown your love for me, they do not sit in smugness over the others or smile knowing smiles because they were already convinced of their favour, no, they are confused. Confused not because they didn't think they should be there, they were, after all gathered around the throne, they found their way to Jesus. No, they were confused because of the criteria on which they were being judged, when did we show our love towards you in practical ways, Lord?

Equally the goats are a bit surprised at their lot. They too have made it to Jesus and seem to know him as Lord. Yet they are to be cast away for lacking in love, for bearing no fruits of the spirit, for showing no compassion to Jesus himself. And they too are confused, no we would never have ignored you Lord, never. Surely, we would have known if you needed something and we would have been right there to provide it.

But, of course, Jesus does not come to us as he once walked the earth. He does not knock on our door and say, hello, I'm Jesus, any chance you can help me with a few things just to prove to me that you truly love me. Just as Christ has no hand or feet in the world to do good except our own and those of others around us, also he has no physical needs in the world save for our needs and the needs of others.

This is perhaps one of the most straightforward parables to understand but often the most difficult to live by. Jesus tells us that we will be judged by him, he will accept or reject us based on our faith. And it is by faith, because if we believe in him and all that he has taught we cannot but change to live by those beliefs. If we attend church but are unchanged then the only conclusion can be that we have not truly believed yet. We will not always get everything right, but we should always be striving make things better.

And this is not about pie in the sky when you die, by grace we are saved and not works, yet if we accept God's grace the works will come, if the works do not come, the grace has not been accepted. Here is where we have been often confused. So keen was the reformation church to insist, and rightly so, that God's favour could not be bought by money or good deeds, that we have sometimes lived as though doing good is entirely irrelevant. The deeds do not cause

God to love us, but they are a symptom of accepting and living by that love, and as such a symptom, become a means by which our faith can be judged.

So we have the clearest picture that Jesus could paint of that judgement, and it is surprising. There is no concern for gender, for age, for race, for wealth, for education, for who we love, for conformity to society's rules, for any of the dividers that the world erects to separate us, one from another. There is a simple 2 way split, sheep and goats.

The reason for the split is the demonstration of compassion in various ways, through meeting the basic needs of their fellow human beings, food, shelter, clothing, company. The split doesn't take into account who the recipient of these kindnesses was, we are just told that when we do it for the least of our neighbours we do it for Christ.

Now please don't think for a second that because we live in a different society and time from Jesus that somehow these opportunities will not present themselves to us. If we think we are in a country which has none of the needs Jesus speaks of we are blind. In any town, people are involved in feeding the hungry at soup kitchens and through distributing food parcels via emergency relief. Op shops are in the business of providing affordable clothing in the community and free clothing to others like the sea farers and the women's refuge. There are people who volunteer at hospitals and prisons to visit those in need under various schemes and programmes. The need is there, Jesus calls us all to meet those needs in our own place and time.

For Jesus, no one is untouchable, all are valuable. We must look at the world with same eyes free from prejudice as he does. Because just as it is that we his people are his voice, hands and feet in the world, so it is that the needy carry his own sufferings through their lives.

If there is something you would set for yourself as a new year's resolution for this coming church year. Some kindness you would wish to do for Jesus, find someone who bears that need and do it for them, be they poor, or disadvantaged, disabled, a foreigner, someone weak, or old or young, do it for them, for in doing so you minister to Christ.