

Sunday 22 November 2020
Christ the King

Matthew 25 vv 31 – 46:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, “come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and gave you something to drink, or needing clothes and clothe you: When did we see you sick or in prison and go and visit you.?”

the King will reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you who are cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. for I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick or in prison and you did not look after me.”

They also will answer, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison and did not help you?”

He will reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me. Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory.....he will separate people into two groups..

Somewhere in the thinking of all religions is the idea that we are responsible and accountable for your actions in this life.

Sometimes the idea is expressed in individual terms, sometimes in corporate terms, but it is always there. For the Hindu there is a belief in a constant cycle of birth, death and rebirth into a state dependent upon the virtue or otherwise of the previous life. Wherever the authority of a god or gods is acknowledged there is punishment for failure fulfil the duty owed to those gods.

In the Old Testament we find the idea of corporate responsibility – hence the delay of a generation before the Land of Promise might be entered, or the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the leading families by Nebuchadnezzar. Individual suffering was assumed to be punishment for disobeying god aor failing to give him his due.

A man called Achan figures in the book of Joshua. He kept for himself plunder that ought to have been given to the Lord and as a result, he, his family and his property were

destroyed, the army lost heart. And the conquest of the Promised Land was put back. It is not clear what Achan expected to do with the cloak and the silver that he kept, for he couldn't show either in public without giving himself away. Maybe he had an eye for the future when the battles of Jericho and Ai had been forgotten and he had received his house and land. Then the stolen property would be working capital for his new life, but it all went wrong. Maybe someone had seen what he did and lost heart in the fighting and ran away at the first sign of resistance.

When he was caught Achan accepted responsibility and confessed, but in spite of this and a degree of sympathy from Joshua, by the law of the time neither he nor his family might benefit from his act and all were killed.

Achan was judged for his actions and punished according to the harsh laws of the time. By contrast, in the New Testament accountability is taken further to include not only actions but motives. In the Parables, pictures of Heaven describe a way of thinking that became the pattern for a Christian life-style in an imperfect world. Judgement and accountability are part of this and may not be ignored.

The story of the sheep and goats makes sense when we know that in the Middle East, common breeds of sheep and goats are less easily distinguished than those with which we are familiar. In the parable, both groups are judged, both surprised by the judgement. One commended for charity of which they were unaware, - they had just responded to a need – the other consigned to punishment equally unaware of what they had done or not done.

At a Presbytery meeting in New Zealand a minister maintained that the sole responsibility of the Church was to preach the gospel and involvement in practical charitable work was not part of this. He was wrong – as even a cursory reading of the gospels would have told him. Citizens of the Kingdom may not cut themselves off from the rest of creation. We have a responsibility to the world of which we are part and may not shirk that responsibility.

This creates a tension in church life between what has been called “Social Gospel” and the proper demands of worship and prayer. At times the church has been little more than a welfare organisation, at other times, so wrapped up in its ritual practiced that it has forgotten the world for which Christ died.

At best, the medieval monasteries combined a life of prayer with a practical concern for the poor, the sick and travellers. Worship and service belong together. In worship we confront the love of God, in service we respond to that love. In the parable with which we began, the favoured group were surprised, their charity owed nothing to a sense of duty – they responded to God's love with love for His needy children.

Next Sunday is the beginning of Advent, a season of preparation for a happy event, the birth of a child. We celebrate God stepping into history as a baby, the universal sign of new life, new hope for the future. A baby brings joy to parents and hope for what may be.

We are called to proclaim the good News of God's love, but also to respond to that love and both we and the world will be judged by that response.