

Matthew 25:31-end - Sermon for 10am

Today's gospel reading is a hard one to hear and an even harder one to preach on. It is full of really difficult concepts and is really controversial for theologians. It is a lot about judgment, as distasteful as that may sound to some of us, and it is a lot about good works, which whilst not distasteful, is probably guilt-inducing to a lot of us. It is a massive challenge for all of us, as most sermons on this will concentrate on good works to those less well off; and this is true. But I'd like this morning to assume that and focus on the vision for the good works a bit more so that it's not so guilt inducing. It's worth saying now, that if this passage disturbs you, intrigues you, or perhaps even inspires you, that's great and well worth coming and chatting to me about after. If it perhaps challenges you that you wish to think about becoming one of Jesus' followers, then please don't leave without talking to me.

Jesus has spent the last few episodes of his life talking about judgment and his return. His followers should be watching. They should be working at the tasks left to them; as we saw last week, using the talents, gifts, resources and time that God has invested in them to bring about the growth of his kingdom. And so today's passage clearly follows on in the same trajectory – Jesus' followers should be watching, working and serving in anticipation of his return. What is different about this passage is that this working and serving extends to others rather than simply working for God's kingdom. You can argue about whether these two objects of work are in fact the same – that working for God's kingdom is about serving others – but certainly there's an emphasis here that shouldn't be lost. Part of working for God's Kingdom is serving others, and even if that serving goes unnoticed by those around us, God has seen and God considers this service of others as service to himself.

So far, so good. We all like the idea at least of being good to others (I hope anyway!). There are two issues here, both theological and ethical at the same time. The first is about judgment. There will be a day, our passage says - we don't know when but it will come – when the Son of Man comes in his glory with all his angels with him and he will sit on a throne of power. If you aren't used to the terminology, basically this is grand apocalyptic speak for “Jesus is coming back as ruler and judge and it will be spectacular.” And on that day everyone, all nations, all peoples, every single one of us, will be gathered in front of him and judged into two piles. These piles are called sheep and goats, referring back to the shepherding task common in Jesus' day of separating out the livestock since they tended to mingle throughout the day. One pile is hereafter referred to as the blessed and the righteous, and the other pile known as the accursed.

Now, there's a whole load of weird and wonderful theology you can go into at your leisure on these labels, you get into some of the great theological arguments of history very quickly, so I'm not going there this morning. If you are interested, come and talk to me. However, the point for us this morning is that this is often not a good thought, the idea of judgment. Personally, I quite like the idea of judgment – hopefully not because I'm a cold callous person who wants people to suffer though. I quite like the idea that Hitler's suicide at the end of the second world war might not be the end of it for him and that one day he might have to answer for his crimes. I quite like the idea that the car that flew past me dangerously on the road the other day gets caught by the nearest speed camera. I quite like the idea that people should not be allowed to kill other people and get away with it. I don't think I'm alone in thinking that judgment per se is not wrong. Our problem tends to be with who does the judging and by what criteria they are judged. We are so used to relativizing all our misdeeds and spotting the flaws in the justice system, when speed cameras become a revenue exercise perhaps, or when the top lawyer in the land changes his mind over the weekend about

whether it is legal to go to war in Iraq. All these issues erode our belief, not in judgment, but in the possibility of fair and right judgments that take into account the perpetrator's own past, their circumstances, and which also is truly just, fair and unbiased justice.

So there will be a judgment. My problem with this is that the separation into two piles seems so black and white. Surely there is more to it? I want mitigation. I want proof. I want the right of reply. And so this judgment feels so unacceptable on the surface.

I suppose I'm labouring this point because for years, the church has backed off from the concept of judgment and I totally understand why. It's not that we don't believe it but we have been stung in the past by the hellfire and damnation sermons of yesteryear and we don't want this again. We are used to a Jesus who loves us and died for us and so judgment becomes an odd part of our faith that we don't really know what to do with and so tend to just not talk about. Today is the celebration of the feast of "Christ the King". Jesus, as divine king, executes judgment. We may not feel completely comfortable with it, but he will do it.

As I said, a lot of my discomfort in Jesus' judgment comes from my worries about imperfect judges and extenuating circumstances. Perhaps it is because I'm not convinced that the current justice system works perfectly, I cannot imagine a justice which is indeed perfect. One that is able to avoid judicial bias, one that weighs all the circumstances of the offender, and one that is able to wisely deliver judgment that is right rather than popular or victim-orientated. Jesus' judgment will be right. It will be all-knowing and it will be unbiased. There's no hint of a need for an appeal court. The justice we all yearn for will happen, and that's good news in the end.

The second issue is who Jesus' family is in verse 40 and who are the "nations" gathered in verse 32. It seems a slightly banal point but on this also hangs a huge amount of theological controversy. There are a couple of Greek words which are important which again, if you are interested, come and talk to me about, but fundamentally, I'm sold on the idea that in verse 32 we are talking all people from every time in every place – a big gathering together where everyone from history comes before their King, even if they didn't recognise him or even know of him. Then in verse 40, the word is literally Jesus' brothers; his way of referring - generally in the masculine, but that isn't intended as an exclusive blokes-only group – to those who follow him. When we become followers of Jesus we are part of his family as we talked about a few weeks ago. So, the crux then becomes, perhaps different to how we've heard it before, that there is some judgment based on the treatment by each person of the little followers of Jesus. When someone helps out one of Jesus' family, they are helping out Jesus himself.

Now, some of us may respond that this isn't right. We as Christians should be loving everyone, not just other Christians. We are all God's creations and loved by him. And for those outside of the church, this will be even more distasteful – why should they be judged on how they treated Christians as if to privilege them above any other humans who are in need? And even just logically, how can those who died before Christianity was around be judged on these grounds?

I think the way out of this problem is to remove our passage from its isolation and remember that throughout Jesus' teaching he demonstrates and instructs care for the needy, the poor, the sick, the young, and the powerless. Jesus died for the sins of the whole world so that any who receive him can follow him. Jesus therefore doesn't have only a concern for his followers and neither should we. However, we also need to hold in tension this fact with the reading today that clearly at the same time is concerned with how Jesus' spiritual family are cared for. These need not be mutually exclusive.

So, a bit of a heavy sermon, but it's a difficult passage. We could go on for hours. I haven't even mentioned some of the hardest sections in it. But I did promise to give us a new vision for service of our King who judges each one of us rightly, unbiasedly, and with an all-knowing weighing scale. This passage isn't about treating others nicely in case we are judged, although that is important. It is about waiting, watching, working and serving God so that when the king returns, we have been faithful servants. It is a corrective to ensure we don't get lost in our little spiritual worlds of growing God's kingdom and actually do some work! Jesus' kingdom grows by serving God in lots of ways, using all our time, talents, resources, but also, and really importantly, by serving those in need, those who follow Jesus and those who are God's creations and haven't met him yet.

This is what we do while waiting for the king to return. It is the mission entrusted to us, not so we act out of guilt or fear, but out of love and compassion. Jesus referred to his "little brothers" in verse 40 when we read "the least of these who are members of his family". This is affectionate. We are called to love those who are in need, especially those of God's family, but not exclusively. We do this in anticipation of a day when we will meet Jesus and be welcomed into an inheritance prepared before the foundation of the world. We do it, not out of fear, not out of earning a reward, but out of knowledge that as Jesus' followers we serve him and follow the way he goes, do the things he does and love the way he loves. This reward in the future is an inheritance, not some sort of commission. We love as God loves us. We love as Jesus who died for us love us. We serve as Jesus selflessly served and we do this as stewards of God's house, waiting eagerly for his return. Amen.