

Message for November 22, 2020

Christ the King Sunday

Matthew 25:31-46

Morris L. West was an Australian author who wrote several best sellers including “The Shoes of the Fisherman” and “The Devil’s Advocate”. Oddly enough though, it is one of his lesser known books that is one of my all-time favourites; “Summer of the Red Wolf”. This novel is set on the Isle of Lewis off the west coast of Scotland and it is a story about love, hate, death and redemption. One of the book’s characters is a woman named Hannah who was reputed to have the Second Sight; the ability to catch glimpses of the future. In one episode she told the main character that she thought that he would end up with the woman of his dreams. This of course was exactly what he wanted to hear which prompted her to say “Aye, we all love the preacher with heaven in his hand and not a word about the other place”.

How very true; we too so to speak love the preacher with heaven in his hand and not a word about the other place. At one time we Christians were almost obsessed with the final judgement but not any longer; in fact by and large we like to ignore it altogether. Then however we come face to face with the prospect of being judged in today’s scripture passage.

Today’s passage is one of the most disturbing ones of the entire Bible. In it Jesus said that the day is coming when he will return to this earth as a glorious king, take his throne and then sit in judgement. At that time the nations will be divided into two groups: the sheep and the goats. The sheep are the saved and they are saved because they cared for Christ in his time of need. “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.” Some people however say that they never saw Christ in need, and what will his reply be? “Whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me”.

And so off they will go to paradise. The goats on the other hand will be banished to the eternal fire simply because they did not care for Christ in his time of need. When they object saying that they never saw Jesus in need, he will reply: "Whatever you did not do for the least of these brothers of mine, you did not do for me".

Thus goes today's scripture passage and our interpretation of it is almost predictable. Indeed virtually every sermon that I have ever preached or heard based on it goes along these lines; in the end we will be judged and when we are it will not be based on how overtly religious or pious we were. Nor will we be judged on whether or not we held the correct religious beliefs either. Rather we will be judged on the basis of how much we did or did not love. Did we at least try to love our neighbours as ourselves? Did we care, at least a little bit, about those less fortunate than ourselves? In the unforgettable words of Mother Theresa:

"At the end of life we will not be judged by
how many diplomas we have received,
how much money we have made,
how many great things we have done.
We will be judged by
I was hungry and you gave me food to eat
I was naked and you clothed me
I was homeless and you took me in.
Hungry, not only for bread
but hungry for love.
Naked, not only for clothing
but naked of human dignity and respect.
Homeless, not only for want of a room of bricks
but homeless because of rejection.
This is Christ in distressing disguise."

Do we always see Christ in his distressing disguise? If we are honest, then the answer is no, we don't. In the words of one poem:

“Jesus, why didn't you tell me that you were hungry?
Why didn't you tell me that you were thirsty?
Why didn't you tell me those were your toes
sticking through cracked shoes?
I didn't know you needed help.
I want to open the door and invite you in.
Please tell me who you are the next time you knock.”

As I said a moment ago, virtually every interpretation of this passage goes along these lines; be a sheep! If need be, mend your ways and start caring more about others and their needs and not just at Christmas time either! And of course when we are not as loving, caring and sharing as what we could be all is not lost for surely Christ will forgive us. Just imagine for a moment though that this interpretation is wrong.

I recently read a sermon by the well-known American preacher William Willimon and in it he challenges our usual understanding of today's text. He points out for example that according to Matthew when Christ returns and takes his throne, all of 'the nations' will be assembled before him. Now we usually just pass over this phrase without giving it a second thought but as Willimon points out, 'the nations' has a very specific meaning in Matthew's gospel. In his gospel 'the nations' refers to all those people who are not disciples of Jesus. If Willimon is right, and I do believe that he is on to something, then this parable isn't really about us at all. Rather it is about what will happen to all those people who, for whatever reason, do not follow Jesus. They will be judged but not on the basis of their faith or lack thereof. Rather they will be judged on how they behaved, and this brings us to Willimon's second important point.

When 'the nations' object that they never saw Christ in need, Jesus will tell them that whatever they did not do for the least of his brothers they did not do for him. Now what we have to realize says Willimon, is that in

Matthew's gospel the term 'brother' also has a very specific meaning; it refers to the disciples or followers of Jesus. In other words, in the end 'the nations' or non-Christians will be judged on how they have treated us, the disciples of Jesus. If Willimon is right, and I do believe that he is, then what Jesus said about the Great Judgement is not, directly at least, about us at all. Rather Jesus was talking to those who are outside of the church. But if this is the case, does this mean that today's passage has no real meaning or relevance for us?

Of course not. It may go without saying but if Jesus expects so much from those who, for whatever reason do not follow him, then we can be sure that he expects at least the very same of us. We, the disciples of Jesus, are called to follow both his teaching and example; to love, understand and be as compassionate as he was. But of course this is impossible, after all we are only human! And this is when we should remember such as the wonderful words of Paul.

"Who would dare accuse us whom God has chosen? The judge himself has declared us free from sin. Who is in a position to condemn? Only Christ, and Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns in power for us, Christ prays for us! Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus."

The good news of the gospel is that Christ died for us, rose for us and is even now praying for us. Yes, we may be sinners but we are forgiven sinners and in response to the overwhelming love of God made known to us in Christ, we should at least try and live the lives that God would have us do. We should strive to do this all of the time, and not just in the coming weeks leading up to Christmas either.