

Christ the King Sunday

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Christ the King Sunday – Ezekiel 34:11-1, Psalm 100, Ephesians 1:15-23, Matthew 25:31-46

INTRODUCTION:

This Sunday is called Christ the King Sunday because it marks the last Sunday of

Pentecost. Put simply this means that we have come to the end of the Christian Year A. Next Sunday will be the beginning of Advent and the start of Year B. More importantly, though, this is a day of endings. That is why the Gospel reading for today focuses on the final judgment. In it Jesus determines who is acceptable and unacceptable in the kingdom of God

There is also another ending we can consider today. The ending of our feeling of relative safety and possible assumption that those of us living in SA are safe from the dreaded coronavirus. We are not. That insidious virus is still among us, as the last few days have shown. And so is the panic and anxiety that accompanies it. Which just goes to show that not far under the surface of our lives we harbour fear and uncertainty. In a way it is like a trauma, a community trauma. So, where is God lurking in all this?

POINT 1:

I want to look at our Gospel reading from Matthew, because It has something to tell us about where God and Jesus are to be found. And that surely is where we want to be.

Firstly a bit of context about this section of Matthew's Gospel. These verses form part of an eschatological discourse Jesus is having. Eschatology is a fancy word for the last things, or the end times. Prior to these verses Jesus has told

3 parables: the faithful and unfaithful servants (24:45-51), the 10 virgins (25:1-13) and the talents (25:14-30). The theme of these parables is watchfulness, being prepared and diligent with one's talents, so that one is prepared for the final judgment. The verses we are considering today are that final judgment.

So what do we have? We start off with a grand vision of the Son of Man, who is Jesus, seated on his glorious throne. All the nations are gathered before him, so this is expansive and all inclusive. The sorting begins and as a shepherd sorts the sheep and goats, so Jesus sorts some into the sheep group and others into the goat group. It has the feel of a parable at this stage. Generally in the Old Testament the right hand of God is the good side to be on, so we have a hint that the sheep will be better off. The goats, however, are on the left hand of God, which is never a good place to be.

How does the king decide who is a sheep and who is a goat? Solely by the way that they have lived their lives. To the sheep he says, *Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.* The sheep appear confused and ask when did we do these things. They seem to be taking things too literally. And the king answers *Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.*

As you know the goats get the opposite treatment. *Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.*

POINT 2:

What can we learn from this final judgment scene? Well, surprisingly we learn that being a church goer is not a prerequisite to being with the sheep. And even being a person of faith is not a prerequisite. What counts is the orientation of a person's life towards others. Is it open to helping those less fortunate and most vulnerable or not? If your focus is one preserving yourself and overlooking the needs of others, you are a goat. If you are concerned for the vulnerable and weak you are a sheep.

Does this answer the age old question about those who belong to other faiths or who don't know Christ but live an exemplary life? Go figure.

For me, the biggest question that these verses raise is why is Jesus biased to the poor. And by the poor I mean those in most need; the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, those in prison. And the answer that always comes to me is that these are the people who are the most traumatised. This is not to downplay the fact that we all have big and little traumas in our lives. But some are worse than others.

The difference between the sheep and the goats in this Gospel reading is that the sheep were not afraid to engage in the trauma of other people's lives, whereas the goats were concerned with their lives and wanted to avoid the trauma of others. Ironically though the goats avoidance of trauma only lands them in more trauma.

POINT 3:

I believe Matthew is trying to make a point here about the way Jesus looked at life. It is a theological point. And it is about trauma. Jesus is saying in this final judgment that traumatic events happen to us all. Trauma is a part of life. Trauma was the defining event of Jesus' earthly life. How else could you describe the process of his passion and crucifixion. Trauma led to his death. But trauma did not have the last

word. Life, love and resurrection did.

We are made in the image of God and so if Jesus knew trauma, we most certainly will too. This is why the cross of Jesus is so compelling. Because we can relate to his trauma from the experience of trauma in our own lives. This is what compassion and empathy are all about. Feeling the pain of others and trying to help. The big and small traumas of our lives push us towards a God who in Jesus says to us engage with these traumas and they will reveal God to you in new and unexpected ways. This is why Jesus said when you attend to the most vulnerable ie. the hungry, thirsty, stranger, sick, prisoner, you are in fact attending to me. This form of spirituality is well understood in Catholic Christianity, but not so much in evangelical and

Protestant Christianity, where the focus is more on right belief than right action.

CONCLUSION:

This final judgment scene from Matthew's Gospel illustrates that Jesus is primarily concerned with our outlook towards others. Are we people who are concerned for the well-being of others or are we always thinking of ourselves first? This is what determines if one is grouped amongst the sheep or the goats.

Of course, this is hardly a surprising outcome. Even in the Old Testament, the first commandment was to love God and then to love your neighbour as yourself. So those who attended to the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick or imprisoned were those who loved God and their neighbour. Those who didn't attend to the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, or imprisoned didn't love God or their neighbour.

After the week that we have all had, of not knowing what is going to happen next, it is good to know that Jesus' judgment of us is based upon our love for and of each other. I must say

that I have been impressed as a community how we responded to the very abrupt shutdown that was forced upon us. And now that restrictions are easing again let us rejoice that this communal trauma will serve as a reminder to us again that we are called to be sheep that love and not goats who always think of themselves first.

When was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. So this is where God and Jesus are lurking in our lives and longing to reveal themselves. We need look no further than our everyday encounters with those in need.