

Christ the King

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Christ the King A – Ezek 34 11-24 – Matt 25 31-46

These are the last instructions we see Jesus give to his disciples before the story of his passion begins. So these words carry great weight, telling of the last day when all nations will be judged. He starts with a brief parable about the nightly ritual of a shepherd dividing the sheep from the goats, and how the last judgement will be like that. ^{vv. 32b-33}

Then he continues with two 'judgment dialogues'. ^{vv. 34-40, 41-45}

A fascinating detail in the parable is the division of sheep to the right, to inherit the Kingdom, and goats to the left, to be sent from the presence of the King. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the word אַטוד *attud* (male goat) sometimes refers to leaders. ^{Isa 14.9, Zech 10.} Ezekiel condemned Israel's negligent shepherds at the beginning of today's chapter. ^{vv. 1-5} And we just heard him rage at the *attud* trampling the sheep's food and fouling their water. ^{vv. 17-19} Jesus did the same, denouncing the religious leaders of his time. His last words about them were – *Truly I tell you, just as you didn't offer care to one of the least of these, you didn't do it to me.*

On this Christ the King Sunday, 'the King' in this Gospel judgement story reminds us who our King is. The King is our judge. But at the same time, Jesus tells us that he's anyone who needs our help. Four times, we're told the King is anyone who's hungry or thirsty, anyone who's a stranger or a naked pauper, anyone who's sick or a prisoner. The Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez says this means *there's no way to God that bypasses the 'sacrament of our neighbor'*, for love of God is unavoidably expressed through

love of one's neighbour. ^{TLHPS 200}

This passage is one of the most fascinating in the Gospels. It's inspired great works of art and literature, like Caravaggio's painting, the 'seven works of mercy' (the 7th work of mercy

added later – burying the dead) <https://www.caravaggio.org/the-seven-works-of-mercy.jsp> Others tell in story or drama how we meet Christ in anyone who's in need. There's Leo Tolstoy's famous story *Where Love Is, There God Is Also*. It's about a grieving shoemaker Martyn Avdyeich who'd been promised he'd 'meet Christ today'. As he waited at his front window for Christ to come, he helped three needy passers by. He read our Gospel that night, and then realised he *had* met Christ in those three needy people.

Playwrights, authors, philosophers: they've all tried to express the impact of these words of Jesus. One story inspired by today's Gospel I find quite amazing. It tells of a 'German Christian' pastor in 1933 who follows the party line. He demands three times that the Jews in his congregation leave his church. Suddenly, there's movement on the cross above the altar.

The crucified Jesus climbs down from his cross and leaves the church. And as he leaves, he speaks the words of Matt 25:45 – *Truly I tell you, just as you didn't offer care to one of the least of these, you didn't do it to me.* Luz, Mt 21-28, 269

This story takes our understanding a step further. It says we don't just find Jesus our King in the sick and the needy. We find him in the outcast and the despised too. That's why it's so important for the Church to stand united with Aboriginal people, with refugees, with those who are dispossessed by the world's unjust economic system; with everyone who suffers because of the conflicts raging around the world right now. They need to know our love. And *we need* to love them. Because it's in that intersection of pain and love that *all of us* meet Christ our King. If we don't love our neighbour, we won't meet

Him in them, and they won't meet Him in us.

This way of reading the Gospel message – reading it to mean that Christ identifies with all the poor, the needy, the outcast and the despised of the world, regardless of colour, creed or ethnicity – it's a relatively modern understanding. Before 1800, the Church understood the phrase *the least of these who are members of my family* to refer only to baptised Christians. And Matthew in a persecuted minority community may well have meant just that. But different circumstances call out new insights – and we've met some in the stories we've shared today.

There are Christian aid organisations who only focus on helping struggling Christians. In the Russo-Ukrainian war, that's pretty straightforward because most of the affected people are Christians. But in the conflict in the Holy Land, it gets very muddy. Would we only send prayers and help to the Christians caught in that ghastly situation? I think we're called to more than that.

I've always suggested that we support the Al-Ahli الأهلّي Hospital in Gaza. Now it's the only one still functioning in Gaza City. And like all the Anglican-run hospitals and schools in the Diocese of Jerusalem, it serves people of any and every faith and nationality. The Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem, +Hosam Naoum has written this week, *Although the Ahli's buildings are heavily damaged ... our devoted staff have partially re-opened the hospital. In doing this, they demonstrate the determination we have in the Diocese of Jerusalem to persevere in our Christian mission to serve others as though we were serving Christ himself.* (Matt 25:31-46)

<https://www.abmission.org/appeals/emergency-appeals/al-ahli-hospital-emergency-appeal/>

We're about to enter the season of Advent; waiting to meet Jesus both as a helpless baby, and as our King and our Judge. How will we make ourselves ready? Amen