

Sermon – Christ the King – Christ Church, Garden City

Matthew 25: 31-46

Today on this feast of Christ the King we enter into the last week of our liturgical year. Our journey this year has largely been in the company of Matthew as we have followed his account of Jesus' life. Before Matthew turns to the passion and resurrection narratives he outlines three distinct parables of Jesus that describe the kingdom of heaven and the coming end times.

Two weeks ago we heard the parable of the ten bridesmaids and how half of them had appropriately prepared themselves for the long wait for the bridegroom. We heard also that the other half had seemed more impetuous and spontaneous and had failed to bring enough oil to last the night. They were eventually caught short and because the wise women would not share their limited oil they left to go and buy some even though they knew the bridegroom was close. When they were away the bridegroom arrived and they soon found themselves locked out of the wedding banquet.

Last week we heard the parable of the talents and in particular how several of the master's slaves dealt with the responsibility they were given. Several of them invested the talents wisely and grew the value of the asset. One slave however was fearful and felt that the master was a harsh man and that if he messed up he would be judged harshly. So rather than risk success he guaranteed failure by burying the one talent he was given. When the master returned he rewarded those that were wise and reaped a greater return and did indeed judge the other and removed from him what he was given.

Today's gospel is the third of these parables from the 25th chapter of Matthew. It is really more of a vision of the end times than a parable. In the earlier two passages we are called upon to make a choice. At the time of the arrival of the bridegroom or the master our choice will be exposed and no one will be able to help us, nor will we be able to change our minds. Our choices do indeed have consequences. None of us know the time of Jesus return but in today's vision, and the previous two parables, we get a very clear picture of what will happen. Separation and sorting of people will occur along with some form of reckoning.

In the history of the world there has always been some form of reckoning for kingdoms and nations, especially when they veer off the path of truth, justice and mercy. We only have to look at last week's news from Zimbabwe. After 34 years of often-tyrannical rule Robert Mugabe's day of reckoning arrived in a swift change of heart by the military. Now he, and his wife Grace who wanted to succeed him, are out of power and facing an uncertain future. Only God knows how the change will shape the lives of the people of Zimbabwe but we hope that they will turn back toward a path of justice and mercy for all.

In a monarchy the king or queen generally set the tone for the nation. The United Kingdom has largely been a stable and just country under the rule of Queen Elizabeth II. Her sense of service to her people and her Christian faith has set the tone for the country. As she ages though it is increasingly uncertain how a King Charles or a King William will change the tone of that country.

Kings particularly have been part of our biblical narrative since the exodus some 3,000 years ago. When the wandering Israelites crossed into the Promised Land numerous kings and nations were overthrown so the 12 tribes of Israel could settle into the land. Not long after if you recall the people demanded a king so they could be just like the other nations of the region. No longer did they regard God as their king. They wanted an earthly, physical ruler. Despite warnings by Samuel that it was a bad idea, God conceded and Saul was selected and anointed king.

No sooner had he assumed the throne he became corrupted by power and started to deviate from all that the Lord had set before him. The Lord regretted his choice of Saul. It was then that God told Samuel to get over his grief of Saul and he led him out to find David, the boy shepherd that was ordained to become the next king. King David was by all accounts a gracious, fair and tolerant King who righted the nation of Israel and allowed it to prosper.

Successive kings of Israel were not so benevolent. After the Babylonians captured Israel in the 6th century before the Common Era we get a taste of what the nation was like in today's Hebrew bible reading from the prophet Ezekiel. Through Ezekiel, God states his annoyance at the shepherds of the nation, or the kings. Rather than feeding their sheep they have been content with feeding themselves. God's condemnation is sharp. In verses 3-5 of Chapter 34 of Ezekiel God condemns saying, "you eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd."

Thus God must return as the true shepherd and search for the sheep and gather them together. They will be fed with justice. God will then set a man over Israel in the line of David to be a just and merciful king, a true shepherd of the people.

Jesus was born for this purpose. It was therefore important for Matthew to link Jesus to David and Abraham and call him their son. He does this through outlining the genealogy of Jesus which is set forth in the introduction to his account of the good news. Monarchs claim a throne by being able to trace their right to it through birth. Here Jesus is shown to be born as the heir to David's kingdom. Now Jesus is the anointed king.

The vision that Jesus paints for his disciples uses a similar theme to Ezekiel's prophecy. Jesus similarly condemns those that fail to do what is just and merciful. When we read this passage of scripture we can become focused on the humanitarian ideals that Jesus illustrates. In other words we can become focused on what we should be doing in our lives to be judged right in God's eyes.

This passage however is aimed more at nations rather than individuals. The focus of the passage is on how nations will be judged by how they receive and treat Jesus' disciples. The acceptance or rejection of Jesus' disciples by nations will demonstrate an acceptance or rejection of Jesus himself as the Son of Man. This is known as the *Shaliach principle*. This principle outlines that where the acceptance or rejection of an accredited agent, involves the acceptance or rejection of

the sender and the actions they take will be validated on the final Day of Judgment. In this case the agents of Jesus are the members of his family, his brethren the disciples, who are to be commissioned to go out in to the world to proclaim Jesus Christ as King. The question then, as it is now, is how will they be received?

The standard Jesus sets for a nation is probably not how we would evaluate the nations today. Nations are typically evaluated on economic terms such as gross domestic product, unemployment rates and inflation rates. Evaluation on human terms such as how the outsider is welcomed always seems less important.

In Jesus' view however a nation should be assessed on how it cares for it's people, and specifically how it cares for four kinds of people, all of which relate to the state of Jesus' disciples. First the poor, then the sick, then the immigrant and finally the prisoner. If I am poor will you feed me? If I am sick will you care for me? If I am an immigrant or a stranger will you welcome me? If I am a prisoner will you visit me?

Just as David set the tone for the young nation of Israel, Jesus as King sets the tone for all of the nations of the world and for us as inhabitants. Jesus sets the tone in truly human terms rather than esoteric economic terms. Jesus helps us to see how we should order our nation and ourselves by caring for the least among us and the most vulnerable of our human family. For in doing so we will always be striving toward a society that welcomes those of God's family, our brethren. We should also never forget that one day we might be poor, sick, an immigrant or stranger, or in prison, either physically or metaphorically.

Our fallen nature has led our nations into sinful ways of greed, power exploitation and harsh judgment of the other and the vulnerable. These attitudes have manifested themselves into empires which rule through sacred violence, which leads to devastation of land and peoples. Zimbabwe and other failed or failing states are vivid examples of a failure to follow God's example. We shouldn't just look overseas. We need to examine our own nation and it's leadership, and determine how we can work toward improving our care for the poor, the sick, the stranger and immigrant and the prisoner.

For a long time we in the west have been back sliding on these measures. The poor, the sick, the immigrant and the prisoner are often seen as threats and people to be shunned. Resources are stripped from them or in the case of immigrants and prisoners, increased to further aid in their rejection and exploitation.

The good news for us today is that Jesus' vision for the future of nations is explicit. He is showing us how to live in this world as disciples and how to care for those that come into our midst. Salvation is through kindness. This is the Christian ethic that must be used to shape and evaluate our nation for there is nothing ambiguous in it. Jesus Christ is our king forever, the shepherd of the sheep of the nations. We know that if we follow him we will not fail nor be overcome because we put all our hope and trust in Him. At the last day let us be found to have made the right choice and to have been kind and just as a society.

Amen