

ADVENT IS OUR TIME (Lindfield, 22nd November 2020)

MATTHEW 25: 31-64

This is the end of the Gospel Year. Next week Advent begins and the Lectionary will take us through the Gospel of Mark. But today we round off the year with the image of Christ on a throne in the gold-paved, jewel-encrusted city, not with St. Peter at the Pearly Gates but Jesus himself. He asks one question and Matthew tells that our answer determines our destiny.

Christian conservatives find this hard to fathom because the question is not about faith, as Jesus asked on the road to Caesarea-Philippi: “who do you say that I am?” The question is not about orthodoxy at all. God doesn’t even get a look in. Jesus knows these people. But he asks about what they have done with the faith they have. That’s why this story appears after the Parable of the Talents. Are we scared of losing our faith, so we do nothing with it except bury in orthodox soil and hope that’ll be enough? No. That is not enough.

“You’ve fed me when I was hungry, clothed me when I was naked, visited me when I was in prison and when I was sick you cared for me.” He opens the gate and lets them in saying, “ Well done!” They are surprised at the encounter. What sort of test is this? We expected a written test in theology but this a practical test that has been assessed all along. “When you did these things for the least, the lowliest, the lost, the left-behind, the unloved, the forgotten, you did them to me.” Off they go to the shining city.

But the others. Those on his left. Those that are left. “You that are accursed, depart from me into the outer darkness”. Weeping, they ask “Why?” And Christ answers because they did not offer him support: no food for his hunger, no clothing for his nakedness, no comfort when he was imprisoned, no care when he lay ill. “Whenever you did not do it for the least of these, you did not do them for me.”

It’s a matter of identity. When we do or do not do things for others we do or do not do them to Christ. Similar concept of identity that Christ has with the Church. On the road to Damascus when Saul encountered the Christ he introduced himself by saying, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting”. It’s like a sacramental union when you do something to others, you do it to Christ.

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How the world would be different if leaders who professed to be believers in Christ would see their political decisions through this lens?

Apocalypse (things to do with the end times) is a time of profound change, the world as we know it is swept away and in its place a new time, a newborn world emerges. Maybe this is why this reading is given on the week before Advent begins. So we can prepare ourselves for the great identity change that comes in the form of the birth of a baby who is, "God with us".

Here I am, going past a man holding a begging sign or selling "The Big Issue" and quietly judging him thinking it's probably his fault. Here I am, giving conditionally to Christmas appeals to cleanse my conscience.

The year is ending and it is full of hell-fire. Politicians having affairs and only apologising because they were caught, wealthy, wasteful countries, like our own, seeking to ignore Paris agreement targets, spending millions on movie vouchers while there is no increase in the aged pension, spending billions on war ships but saying a few million on fire-fighting aircraft is too much, leaving people stranded overseas during the pandemic and not moving quickly to bring them home, allowing Australian citizens to be interned in foreign jails and not fighting for their release.

We want to lay all our hopes and fears on Christ's shoulders. Yet in this reading for the end of the year he lays them on ours. It is our justice he is judging, our compassion he is eager to see. He is Christ the King. This is the Kingly decree.

Thank God for people with large hearts and generous spirits – whose lives are spent bending to the needs of the least. They see things as hard and harsh as any soldier but they enter the battle not to defeat anyone or win anything. They do not bring guns but medicines, tents, water, rice, blankets, schoolbooks and stoves. They strive to emulate the generosity of God. On the Sunday of the celebration of Christ the King which line have we joined? AMEN.
