

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 22nd November 2020

Ezekiel 34.11-16,20-24; Psalm 95.1-7; Ephesians 1.15-end; Matthew 25.31-end

Today's parable from St Matthew is the last in a series of three parables in chapter 25. They are about being ready, ready for the growing Kingdom of God in all its fullness. All three parables are seriously stark about winners and losers. The winners are those who have built up their spiritual reserves, who have put to work the gifts that God has given them so they can help grow the Kingdom, and also those who recognise that God's growing Kingdom is often about rescuing people, rescuing life's casualties. The losers are those who have not invested spiritually, and who have not recognised the love of God for the poor. It's all pretty uncompromising stuff and not for the faint hearted!

Such a message seems to stand in dramatic contrast to the message of the Cross throughout the New Testament, which is all about forgiveness and understanding for human shortcomings. This is the message that despite all our sin and failure, God is ready to accept us into his growing Kingdom, on the basis of no more than genuine repentance on our parts. Genuine repentance of course includes serious amendment of life.

This divine acceptance, please note, is not on the basis of all sorts of excuses and avoidance of the seriousness of our sin, but of genuine repentance, and trust in the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. God is not to be fooled; nothing else comes close; genuine repentance and trust in the grace of God is the only Christian show in town. So what is Matthew 25 really all about, with its crises of judgement?

We are now in that part of the Christian year where our Sunday themes turn us towards the fulfilment of all things, the time when the growing Kingdom of God is established in all its fullness. The unsettling thing, is that this ultimate fulfilment only seems to come about through major disasters, and conflicts on a ghastly cosmic scale. Bit of a downer that! There are some interesting resonances for us too, in a time of pandemic. However, the particular signs, of the troubles of the end-times in the Bible, are mostly to do with the particular outlooks and circumstances of those times, and should be taken as symbolic rather than actual predictions.

What is not merely symbolic however, is that the coming of the Kingdom of God always involves a kind of radical overthrowing of the ways of humankind, so that the ways of God may prevail. This is one clue to the uncompromising message of Matthew 25.

The second clue, is that in the teaching of Jesus, the growing of the Kingdom of God is never about something that happens just sometime in the future. The most important meaning is actually about what happens now, in this life. Jesus taught that at any moment the opportunity may come upon us, in the here and now, to be part of God's growing Kingdom in some way; unexpectedly, without warning. And the way we react in the moment is vitally important, not only to the building of the Kingdom, but also to our own spiritual health.

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The opportunity to help someone, to forgive someone, to be generous to someone, to be reconciled to someone, to love someone, to achieve justice for someone; often these moments come upon us unexpectedly. A true citizen of the Kingdom of God is ready, with spiritual oil in their lamp, already investing their gifts in growing the Kingdom, and already recognising God's love for the poor.

The real point of those crises of judgement in Matthew 25, is not about being eventually accepted into heaven, but whether we are going to be part of God's kingdom in the here and now. Are we ready now, are we investing now, are we rescuing the poor now? For the real tragedy for you and for me and for our churches, is when we are not being part of the Kingdom of God in the here and now. Excluding ourselves from God's kingdom is to put ourselves in that place of outer darkness and anguished disappointment. (That's the gnashing of teeth bit, anguished disappointment!)

And the key to the Kingdom? Is simply, wholeheartedly, to follow Jesus, the king of the kingdom; who is our teacher, our saviour, our guide, and our friend. For we are not being called just to follow a demanding and self-sacrificing moral philosophy, we are being called to follow a friend who will show us the true way of life. For such is the conflict with human nature, for such is the radical nature of the Kingdom of God, that only in the grace of God can we ever have the grace and strength to be part of it. Only with Jesus beside us, only by following Jesus as our true king, can we be strong enough to play our part in God's growing Kingdom.

When we are in the presence of Jesus our king, we will find ourselves indeed, with enough spiritual oil in our lamps, we will find ourselves investing our gifts in his kingdom, and we will find ourselves already recognising God's love for the poor. Because all these things are works of God's amazing and loving grace anyway. They are the true gifts of the true king to his beloved brothers and sisters.

Today is the Feast of Christ the King. The point about the kingship of Jesus, is that he is a true king, and not like the capricious and scheming political rulers of the earth, and not like the privileged symbolic heads of state of our time. Jesus is our true king and leader, and when we face the challenges of these present times, and when we face the conflicts in our human nature, and when we face our fears for the future, he is the one who calms our souls and gives us hope. And he alone is worthy of our love and our devotion and our loyalty. Amen.

CJ. 22.11.20