

Sermon, Feast of Christ the King, Beverley & Brookton, 26th November, 2023

Today is the last Sunday of our Christian Year, which has been dedicated, over more recent decades, to a celebration of Christ as King. When we return to Church next Sunday it will be Advent Sunday, the first Sunday of our Christian Year. In celebrating Advent, we look forward to not only the story of the Incarnation of God becoming human in the form of his son, Jesus, at Christmas, but we take the opportunity to think about, and look forward, to the Second Coming of Christ. The celebration of the Feast of Christ the King in pointing to the end of time, when the kingdom of Jesus will be established in all its fullness to the ends of the earth, is an obvious lead into Advent, with its anticipation of Christ's second coming. This commemoration was instituted in the Roman Catholic Church by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as a response to growing secularism and secular ultra-nationalism, not least in Europe and on the Italian Peninsula (Apennine Peninsula), and at a time of growing loss of civil authority and land by the Papacy, as the identity of an Italian nation grew. Over time the celebration has been taken up by other churches, including Anglicans, and our brothers and sisters in Lutheran, Moravian, Methodist, Nazarene, Reformed and United Protestant, Presbyterian churches.

Our Gospel reading this morning, the "Parable of the sheep and the goats" is the last of the three parables which concludes Jesus' public teaching in the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel of St Matthew. As with the previous two parables in that chapter, the "Parable of the sheep and the goats", and "The Parable of the talents", it speaks about the end of time when Jesus will return to the earth to complete his work of redeeming creation. Like the previous two parables, this parable sends a clear message that there are those who will enter into eternal life with God, and those who will not.

In the Creed which we affirm most Sundays we confess that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. Verses 31-33 of our Gospel says: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left." You might say that this judgment will be the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises. Therefore, how might God judge us? The reality is that each of us faces judgment. We might shudder at the thought of God judging us, because we know that we haven't lived up to God's standards. We may want to do the right thing, but so often what we want to do, and what we actually do, are two different things. That's what makes the idea of a final judgment so scary. We are afraid that on the basis of our record we won't hear words of blessing and a welcome into heaven. We are afraid that Jesus will say, "Away from me, you that are under God's curse! Away to the eternal fire which has been prepared for the Devil and his angels!" If it were up to us to present a case in God's courtroom, why we deserve to be "called blessed and possess the kingdom which has been prepared for us since the creation of the world" we would fail miserably.

However, there is Good News for while Jesus is the King and Judge he is our Saviour. We believe and trust that he died on the cross to clear us from any accusation that will come up on the last day. His death wiped away all guilt for the good we fail to do. Let us not forget that Jesus died to save us, thereby ensuring that those who trust in him will not die but have eternal life. I suspect that if our eternal future depended on the good things we did in this life then we would be doomed for sure. Every good thing we do is covered with our own selfishness and pride. Thank God that our eternal future rests solely on Jesus who saves us.

This parable gives us a good picture of what genuine faith looks like. A genuine faith will show itself in acts of love towards others. People who have faith in Jesus will see to it that those who are hungry, thirsty, a stranger, poor, sick, or in prison have their needs met. They understand that to help such people is what their faith is all about. Those without genuine faith say: "Yes I believe in Jesus" and then do nothing. Showing love toward others and taking care of their needs is the way faith in Jesus is put into action, or as the Letter of St James says in its Second Chapter, Verses 14 to 17, "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

In the story did you notice how surprised the faithful people were when told that they had been so caring toward others? ""When did we do that? When did we see you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick or in prison?" It is a reminder that true Faith naturally demonstrates itself in acts of love. It's as natural as an apple tree producing apples or a tomato plant producing tomatoes. Faith gives food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, welcome to the stranger, company to the sick and imprisoned, without being told, without thinking about it. That's how faith in Christ bears fruit.

This parable leaves us asking: Am I a sheep or a goat? Am I on the right or the left? Our sin tells us we are goats. Our faith does not show itself the way God would like us to show it. We have neglected the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned. Our faith has not been demonstrated in our daily life. On the other hand, we are sheep. Our Baptism brings us into Shepherd's flock. We are loved dearly by Jesus who gave his life to rescue us. We are his forgiven sheep to whom he says, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father! Come and possess the kingdom." Without Jesus we are condemned as goats, but with Jesus we are blessed. Let us look forward to the day when God's grace at work in our lives is fulfilled. As we continue to wait for that day may we live by faith, continue to nurture faith through the God's gift of his word and sacraments, and may our faith in Christ show itself in the way we care for those in need.