

The Sunday before Advent – The Festival of Christ the King

Collect: Eternal Father, whose Son Jesus Christ ascended to the throne of heaven that he might rule over all things as Lord and King: keep the Church in the unity of the Spirit and in the bond of peace, and bring the whole created order to worship at his feet; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Ephesians 1.15–end: I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him so that with the eyes of your heart enlightened you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Gospel; Matthew 25.31–end: ‘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. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

Reflection: Open our ears, O Lord, to hear your word and know your voice. Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills, that we may serve you today/now and always. Amen

Well, we have a set of challenging readings this morning. Well for me anyway. In our Gospel reading we hear about Jesus sitting on the throne of his glory and separating people, the sheep from the goats. The sheep, as a metaphor, is used often in the bible. For all of you geeky statisticians out there it is mentioned a total of 218 times. And 42 times in the new testament alone. That is a lot. Goats, by comparison, are mentioned 8 times in the new testament. The Sheep are placed at his right hand and the goats on his left. It very much appears to be that Jesus is sorting people out into the good and the bad, the saved and the damned, those for heaven and those sent to hell.

This is the first of my challenges. As I am someone who came to religion later in life, I have always struggled with a few things which others seem to accept. The idea of heaven and hell, final judgement, is one of these. I feel that this flies in the face of the idea that God loves us all and sent Jesus to sacrifice himself for the sake of all sinners. This is at the heart of Jesus' ministry and the heart of our faith. So here it could be read that, despite this, if we haven't been good enough, we are not saved through Jesus Christ but are cast into hell. I hope you can see my challenge. If it is up to us to earn salvation then Jesus died for nothing.

I will come back to this in a bit but let us now look on the criteria on which we are to be separated. This I find a lot easier. Feed the hungry, offer drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, visit the prisoners. We can look at this and strive to do these things. We can do these things as if we had the wonderful opportunity to serve Jesus himself. Essentially we are being separated on the basis of love thy neighbour as thyself. Brilliant. That is fine and dandy, I can cope with that.

This idea that if you love your neighbour then you will be repaid in heaven is not something new. Back in the Old Testament in Proverbs 19:17 it says, 'Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full.' What is clear in our reading is the urgency with which Jesus gets his message across. We are used to Jesus teaching and the disciples struggling to understand. To put this in context, this comes just before the events leading up to Jesus' crucifixion. He is aware it is soon and must get this key message across and fully understood. The message, I think, is simple enough. We are not being asked to complete some Herculean tasks or amazing feats of charity but simple uncalculating things to help others. We do these things to build a strong relationship with God.

I think it is like all situations with parents and children. If you really want to help a parent, you help their children. If you want to be kind to a parent you have to be kind to the children. You cannot leave someone's child to go hungry and then expect your relationship with them to be strong. It is the same with your relationship with God. You need to foster this living relationship through care for all His Children.

So back to the idea of eternal punishment. What is this? Are we to think of Jesus sharing an idea of circles of Hell the likes of which Dante describes in 'The Divine Comedy'? Fire and brimstone? I really don't think so. Instead I think about what makes me happy and what makes me most in pain. I would have to say that this relates to being with those whom you love. Fulfilment does not come through a large bank account, a flashy car, or a big house but through relationships with loved ones. Anyone who has grieved can talk of the desperate pain and torment of being separated from loved ones. So this is the separation we are really hearing about from Jesus. We will find fulfilment and eternal life through building a solid relationship with God and we do this through taking care of His Children. Failing to do so will lead to being separated from God. Which can only lead to the greatest pain and the largest suffering.

I want to leave you with the thought about the life of St Francis of Assisi. He was a wealthy, high born and high-spirited young man but was not happy. One day he met a leper, jumped down from his horse, flung his arms around him and showed him love. And when he looked at the leper's face he saw the face of Jesus. This made him happy and he changed his life to find ways to help others and build his relationship with Jesus, every day.