

Christ the King 2020, Year A,

Readings: Ephesians 1.15-23 ; Mt 25.31-46; Ps. 95.1-7

Over the last few weeks we have been looking at parables from what is termed the Judgement discourse in Matthew's gospel: beginning with the parable of the five wise and foolish virgins/bridesmaids and following on with the parable of the talents. In one we noted the need to be prepared and in the other the need to use well the talents that have been entrusted to us. Today we turn our attention to the parable of the sheep and the goats. It is worth pointing out that each parable is built on a contrast such as being prepared versus being unprepared, being wise rather than foolish, being active in the employment of one's talents versus being lazy and today about coming to and ministering to need or not. The needs mentioned are hunger, thirst, nakedness, being a stranger, being sick or being imprisoned.

Each parable is spoken to the Church that is yet to be. Jesus is giving pointers on how to live a life as one of his disciples post resurrection and ascension. At Morning Prayer during the last weeks we have been reciting words from the Scroll of the Prophet Isaiah that have been joined to form a canticle called A Song of the New Creation.

"I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert,  
to give drink to my chosen people,  
'The people whom I formed for myself,  
that they might declare my praise."

God shows us a way in the midst of life, in the midst of this wilderness moment to be fully human as God's disciples in the world. And God does this as the prophet declares by forming a people that they might declare his praise. To be a Christian is characterised by a readiness and willingness to be formed by God by following his way though the wilderness, by not only saying but also by believing Thy will be done – and acting accordingly.

These parables from the Judgement discourse are about how Christians are to present themselves in the world. They are to be wise. They are to be prepared. They are to use the talents with which they have been entrusted. They are to go to and minister to those in need. This ministry may be unconscious, unknowing as implied by the parable when the righteous answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw

you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty” etc. These acts of charity, meaning love modelled on Christ’s love, are done as a matter of course. We all like to be thanked. We all like to be appreciated. But it often feels a little strange to be thanked for what is one’s duty. What should be selbstverständlich - a matter of course.

What we come to see having spent time with these parables is that although they can stand alone they are in truth interwoven. They enrich one another. They complement one another. They complete one another. Jesus who is with the disciples on the Mount of Olives before his anointing and the Last Supper is drawing a picture of how his disciples in every age and in the age to come will present themselves in the world. They will be prepared. They will employ their talents. They will not be afraid. They will be people who go to and minister to those in need not priding themselves, but rather knowing that this is what they are being asked to do and as they grow in Christ, in Christlikeness, in the mind of Christ it will also be their desire. It will become second nature. It is what in part at least is meant by a new creation.

Christians in time will not only be doers, but they will also become advocates of righteousness and justice mirrored in God’s will, and social reformers. The picture drawn in this parable does not exhaust itself in acts of charity towards the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison, but must look to fundamental change in the way we order our common lives. The calendar of the Church of England lists a number of social reformers of the 19th and 20th centuries: Josephine Butler, Samuel and Henrietta Barnett, William Wilberforce, Florence Nightingale, Octavia Hill, Elizabeth Fry and Eglantyne Jebb. I note that the majority of them are women underlining the transforming power of Christian women’s faith and ministry in the 19th and 20th century. Looking at the calendar I was also reminded of Edith Cavell, who inspired by her Christian faith risked her life saving the lives of soldiers on both sides of the conflict of the First World War. She is known for sayings such “I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone.” And “I can’t stop while there are lives to be saved.”

Each parable is a wake-up call. Often we are foolish rather than wise, unprepared rather than prepared, afraid rather than bold, lazy rather than diligent, indifferent rather than attentive, unwilling to go the extra mile. Often we are lazy in using our talents and neglect the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison. Sometimes we can do something concrete like giving food, water, clothing. Sometimes, and more often than we think, what we can give is our

attention, our presence, which can mean as little as picking up the phone in these days. My point is that few of us are one or the other, a goat or a sheep. We are often a mixture of the two, but the Christian life calls, the Body of Christ calls, Jesus calls, God calls us to dig deep.

Being a presence to one another and the world brings me to where I have been heading with this sermon taking us back to the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, his Emmanuel, God with us. Call to mind Matthew's infancy narrative. There an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and says, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel", which means, "God is with us."

During Jesus' earthly ministry and again in Matthew's gospel he assures the disciples: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Mt 18.20) Jesus' final message to his disciples in Matthew's gospel is embedded in the Great Commission: "Go make disciples of all the nations", but it ends with a message of assurance and it is on the basis of this foundational assurance, not without it, that we can be encouraged to invite God in to form us for himself. "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Mt. 28.20b)

One can picture Matthew's Gospel like an arch. It begins with Isaiah's prophecy in the ear of Joseph, "Emmanuel, God with us". The arch reaches its zenith with "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." And the arch concludes with "... remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." It is an arch that spans our lives, our community, our age, God with us. But to my mind it is also an arch that spans all of time for Christ has dominion over all things. His rule being a just and gentle rule in which we are quietly governed. All things are within Christ's purview. Think of today's Ephesians reading: "God put all things under his feet." And God put Christ "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..." What manifests itself in one moment of time is true of all time. For me the arch is not unlike God laying his hand on all of creation. It is a hand that blesses, not unlike the priestly hands of blessing as they rest on the head of all who ask for a blessing for themselves and the whole of creation.

This arch in turn reminds me of another arch that since the birth of our first grandson in January 2019 has personal significance. It is the arch in the heavens. It is the bow in the clouds. It is the rainbow. A sign worth calling to mind, for in that covenant God makes a promise that we need to hear.

“God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.’ God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.’” (Genesis 9.12-27)

In the New Covenant in Jesus’ name building on the Noahic covenant we call to mind Emmanuel, God with us, always, until to the end of time. Not only will we endure because of human ingenuity and lockdowns, but we will endure because of God’s promise to us to be with us in Christ. This is a quality of being and living that is peculiar to us as Christians, the pearl of great price. God is a presence in our lives which is forming us into a people who sing God’s praises in and out season, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, while sharing and meeting Christ in the other, while making known Christ to all.

Finally, in the words of the Psalmist,

God is our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.  
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;  
though its waters roar and foam,  
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.  
[We] will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, for ever;  
[we] will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.  
(Psalms 46.1-3, 89.1)