

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 23 NOVEMBER 2014
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Ezekiel 34: 11-24; Psalm 95; Matthew 25: 31-46



for

“Rule of Christ”

Before we start, I think it is important to establish first of all that we all agree that the worldview assumed by all three texts we have read this morning is a valid and realistic worldview, not only for their time, but also ours, and perhaps even for all time.

That worldview says that the world is, in general, not a good place for a very large part of the world population. Many who are in positions of power are not necessarily committed or motivated to bringing about a more just, more peaceful, more user friendly world for everyone, everywhere, benefitting those who are now struggling in one way or another in particular. There is a lot of injustice and suffering in the world, and those in leadership positions aren't always the ones who are trying to change that for the better.

The particular context in the background of the passage from Ezekiel is a situation of exile, of displacement, of mismanagement, of failed leadership, of the poor falling victim to the greed and cold-hearted egocentricity of the rich. The Babylonians have come and taken the people from their homes and country to a place far away. With their own leaders ruining the country even before they were taken away, failing to rule with justice and compassion, their decisions self-serving and opportunistic.

The context in the background of Psalm 95 is not dissimilar to that. Perhaps not exactly exile, but a situation where those who worship God are not necessarily the ones who live by his commands.

The context and background of the gospel passage is again one of exile, displacement, destruction, ruin, mismanagement, and self-serving opportunism of the leadership, resulting in persecution and suffering for their people.

When Matthew writes his gospel, the temple has just been destroyed, the Jewish nation is no more, and many of its inhabitants have fled to just about every corner of the known world.

In the gospel, the passage we read today is preceded by three other parables that are full of judgement day imagery, followed by the public execution of Jesus.

I believe it is important to keep all of that in mind when we look at the passages we read this morning. The world they are conceived in is no happy, carefree and lovely place. It is a world where everything has fallen apart, has been turned upside down, a world full of displaced, disoriented people, a world filled with terror and fear. A world where the Mighty have shown their muscle, and ordinary people have been left lost and without hope.

It is in that context that Jesus says:
“When the son of man comes in his glory”

And those who first read the gospel, after Jesus' execution, after the destruction of the temple, after the collapse of their Jewish homeland, may well have wondered what that meant.

After centuries of Christendom, of being the dominant cultural force in society, it may be all too easy for us to translate that into traditional empire and king imagery. Jesus as the King who replaces all kings; Jesus as the emperor who replaces all rulers of all empires.

But is that really what we should be reading here? Isn't what the gospel proclaims, and what faith confesses, something radically different?

What is Jesus' throne of glory? Where does he get crowned? We, who know how the story finishes, know where, and it is not in the halls of power. The throne Jesus ends up on is a cross, and the crown he will wear is made of thorns. According to the gospel, according to every New Testament witness, the cross is where Jesus shows his glory, the thorns crowning him king.

Even in Revelations, which is relatively rich in triumphalist imagery, it is still the lamb, the suffering servant, and not some mirror image of the Roman emperor that is depicted as ruler of the Kingdom of God.

When the son of man comes in his glory, that glory will be the glory of one crucified, of one succumbing to injustice, torture and death. That will be his glory, which distinguishes him from other rulers of this world.

We tend to forget that. Too easily, when we read about glory and thrones, we skip a few centuries and imagine Jesus as some late Roman or Medieval emperor with golden robes, with a crown covered in precious stones, holding a scepter and an orb. Neither Matthew, or any of the other New Testament writers, would have had that image in their minds. At that time, in their situation, that would have been totally impossible to even think of.

So what happens when the son of man comes into his glory? When he takes his place on his throne? When Jesus is crucified and dies, crowned with thorns on a cross?

What happens is that the sheep get separated from the goats. A distinction is made between those who are with him, and those who are not. You may have noticed that this sentence very closely resembles a similar sentence, and similar imagery, in Ezekiel, where sheep are separated from sheep and goats from goats. One from the other. One type of person distinguished from another type of person.

So who is with Jesus? Who are the members of his family, as the NRSV so beautifully translates. Who are the members of the Royal Family here? The hungry, the thirsty, the naked, those who have ended up in prison (and most of those would have been, in Matthew's day, political prisoners and victims of religious or ethnic persecution). The down and outs. The suffering, the oppressed, and the displaced. And who are the ones who are put in a place of honour? Who are the ones who get to enjoy the good life in the realm of this King? They are the people who looked after his family, who made a difference in their lives, who embraced them and sat down with them in their place of suffering.

I think it is important to realise when we read this in our time, from our perspective of comfortable, still fairly dominant and domineering Christianity, that we can hardly imagine what this text would have meant to those it was originally written for.

And perhaps, to catch a glimpse of the message it carried for the first readers of the gospel, we should read it from the perspective of people in detention, of people suffering under the rule of Isis, of people struggling in contexts where injustice is accepted as par for the course, and a few victims more or less are not counted as important. Child labourers, cocoa farmers, people dismantling container ships on the coasts of places like Bangladesh and India, what do you think they hear when Jesus says "When the son of man comes in his glory?"

When they realise that the glory referred to is not a glory that would look very similar to that of their current oppressors, but that the glory referred to here is the glory of one suffering just like they do; suffering injustice, persecution and death, just like they do and discovering that in that is God, embracing the world, starting a new thing, pushing for new life.

That they, and those who try to make the world a different place for them, are on God's side, on the winning side, on the side where the ultimate power lies? Not the power of gold and gemstones, not the power of political muscle and military might, but the power of love, of compassion, of embracing the smallest, most insignificant of people and crowning them with glory.

When that happens, it becomes clear that when we look at all the nations assembled, there is a difference between people and people. There are those who are "family" and those who are not. And the behaviour of those who are not needs to be condemned.

There is injustice that can't be tolerated if the Kingdom of the one whose glory was revealed in suffering, on a cross, crowned with thorns is to come about.

Eternal punishment? Again, I think it would be too easy if we projected that onto a world hereafter. To a medieval hell where all the bad people are gathered together after death. Eternal life, or eternal punishment, is never like that in the Bible. Eternal is never just about a far-away future. Eternal in scripture, and especially in the gospels, is a quality and not a quantity, something that extends from the past, into the present, towards the future, rather than something in some confined time and space.

Eternal punishment begins here and now. And what the Bible testifies is that a life based on injustice, the life of those who find themselves at Jesus' left hand, is not really worth living, not even here and now. It may look different, but in the end, the life of those who look after Jesus' family, who feed the hungry, cure the sick, and clothe the naked, is the life that has eternal value, eternal quality, is fulfilled and fulfilling. This is because it lives the Kingdom here and now, because it lives by the rule of the servant King here and now, lives a reality that is better, holier and, ultimately, of more value than other ways of life.....

To return to where this sermon began: Glory for those who want to belong to the family of Jesus Christ is something completely different than what it is for some others in this world. To be part of this Church, means to be committed to following in Jesus' footsteps and looking for his type of glory. The glory of embracing the suffering of this world and taking it into ourselves, to transform it for the least of these that suffer, to bring justice and a different kind of life experience to the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the naked and the prisoners of this world. Not with a view to earn some well-deserved five-star eternal holiday at the end of it, but to live a life of eternal value in the here and now, creating a world ruled by those values here and now, aiming at overthrowing the Kings of this world with the rule of a different King. A servant King. The good life is a life that is fulfilling and fulfilled with healing and wholesome love and compassion. Amen.