

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
CHRIST THE KING
SUNDAY 20 NOVEMBER 2011
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Ezekiel 34: 7-11; Psalm 100; Matthew 25:31-45

“Sentence or Promise?”

Today we celebrate “Christ the King”, the last Sunday of the Church year before we start our preparation for Christmas with the season of Advent.

In today’s reading Jesus appears as the apocalyptic judge, passing judgement on the nations, separating good from bad, and establishing a standard by which to gauge the difference. The language and imagery belongs to a literary genre called apocalyptic writing, which was popular in Jesus’ day amongst Jews and Christians alike but has also been widely used by others in situations of oppression and hardship across the ages.

It is a genre that writes about the end times, projecting dreams and visions of liberation and salvation into the far future, often with a future King or Messiah passing judgement or meting out punishment to people who looked suspiciously similar to those whom the writers saw as responsible for their own or their community’s suffering in the here and now. It was protest literature, critical and subversive by imaging the possibility of another world where the current reality would be turned on its head.

The passage we read from Matthew 25 was written when the fledgling Christian community was small, vulnerable and under threat. Scorned by Jews and Romans alike they were struggling to survive. Through apocalyptic imagery and metaphor they say what they believe to be true: That Jesus was the long awaited Messiah, the apocalyptic King whose reign would bring an end to oppression and suffering like they were experiencing in the here and now. At that time it would have looked highly unlikely Jesus would ever be in a position to pass judgement on anyone and be the King this passage dreams of. As he would have been, to most, as yet, no more than a wandering rabbi who had been crucified by the Romans. Writing about him as the future King of the apocalypse was, at that time, an act of defiance and subversion most outsiders would not even have taken seriously. Silly Christians with silly dreams. Nevertheless this dream is a seed, a subversive seed that queries the present order and puts another over against it: one where those who are the least and the last in the present order come first.

What Matthew says is this: If I imagine Jesus as the future King some say will come at the end of time, what I think he would say and do is this.

Jesus would be a shepherd King. With this he is going back to a long tradition of scripture of describing good, solid, responsible, and merciful rulers who look after their subjects with compassion and care as shepherds. Many of the great leaders of old even were shepherds before they became great leaders. Abraham, Moses, David, they are all shepherds before their call to leadership. They all so to speak receive their training for leadership by looking after a flock of sheep, protecting them, guiding them, feeding them and caring for them.

Jesus imagined as King is not anything like the Roman Emperors of the day, or their representatives, is what this text says. He is different. He is like Abraham, and Moses, and David. Earlier on in the gospel it has been established he is not like the careless shepherds Ezekiel 34 talks about, but a good

shepherd who will risk everything and lay down his life for his flock if need be.

The gospel then goes on to say that this Shepherd King does not only look after his flock, but identifies with the flock. He doesn't stay on the throne. He descends from his throne to become one with his people. Identifying with the least among them.

"... 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 in prison and you visited me."

That this long list of examples is repeated three times is no coincidence. It's rubbed in so it won't escape attention. In these examples Jesus meets all others who do not fall into those categories. And the standard for his judgement as King is established by what is, or is not, done to them. When this King decides who will have pride of place in his Kingdom he doesn't decide on the grounds of race, religion or nationality, or by wealth, power or importance. On the contrary, it is those who significantly lack any of these attributes who receive his attention first, and then anyone who looked after them in any way, shape, or form.

Anyone, (those who are in a position to look after the least as well as the least themselves) and that is as important a distinction for Matthew's audience as it is for us today.

In the world of the small Christian group Matthew is writing for, there was insecurity about who could be counted "in" or "out". Those who came from a Jewish background were used to a very exclusive view: only those who were born from a Jewish mother were truly "in", while all others were "out". With the greco-roman traditions generally far more tolerant and inclusive.

Where should the Christian community draw the line? Who would be recognised by Jesus as "his people"? Who should be given support? And how did Jewish and Pagan friends and family who lived a "Christian life" but were not Christians fit in? Were they "in" or "out"?

In New Testament times this was a big issue. The answer given here seems to be that anybody from "the nations" who qualifies either as part of the least or as one of those who looked after them is, according to Jesus, part of his flock. Included to share in his glory and inheriting his Kingdom. Even, or even especially so when they aren't part of the Christian community and have done so without realising, without "knowing" they were following the Jesus way. Not only the righteous Christian or Jew, but even the righteous pagan who doesn't "know" the Lord or the law will be counted in, and may be welcomed before Jew and the Christian who have had the benefit of learning the ways of God and Christ. All the nations will be welcomed by the King.

The door is thrown wide open here for a multi cultural, multi faith community that is to be judged only by the standard of righteousness and care, the standard of the good shepherd looking after his people and identifying with the least of his flock. Anybody can become part of that Kingdom, of that future, share in those eternal values of goodness, righteousness, wholeness and healing of the world. Values that will, in the end, prevail, where Christ is King.

Those however who make a different choice, who do not follow the Jesus way where the vulnerable of this world are concerned and live their life by different values will end up in eternal hell fire.

That image of eternal hell fire is one I have had trouble with for a long time. When I was a child it was used to threaten us, and keep us on the straight and narrow. I was made to believe even the smallest of peccadillos might let me end up in that place, and when I was very little I believed I would not only burn for all eternity, but turn into a goat first.

I don't know if, at the time this text was written, the imagery of hell was taken literally or if it was a metaphor. I am sure it was never meant to scare small children. It is part of a far bigger picture and more general issue. The issue of a world that needs changing, of vulnerable and suffering people needing looking for justice and salvation, of establishing a standard, for separating good from bad, right from wrong.

I find it difficult to see it as literal, but that may be my 21st century way of understanding the world and the gospel. Christ sending people off into eternal pain does not tally with my faith in a loving, merciful and forgiving God. It doesn't tally with the good shepherd, and his determination to find the lost sheep and bring it safely back into the fold.

The only way I can understand this text is as a metaphor that says that what is at stake here is of eternal importance. That it matters for all eternity what choices we make, which side we choose to be on.

In our choice for right or wrong, favouring the least or being against them puts God's future at stake. God's Kingdom, Jesus' Kingship, starts to take shape where the least are looked after and cared for. Bringing the eternity of God into the here and now. Bringing heaven to earth. While the other choice takes us to a place of fire and brimstone where we are cut off from God and a Christ-like life forever.

In my experience and understanding, Christ is not a harsh and unforgiving judge who condemns people to eternal suffering. My experience of Christ is one of redemption, healing, love and infinite compassion. While hell is something that we bring on ourselves and others when we make the wrong choices, when we fail to follow in Christ's footsteps and become like the shepherds Ezekiel 34 talks about. People who don't care, who are indifferent to the fate of others, who don't take their responsibility for the world that surrounds them seriously, who mercilessly pursue their own self-interest create hell on earth.

God and his Kingdom happen where we make the right choices, and while making those choices we are welcomed into it, as close friends and companions of Christ. Where we make the wrong choices we will end up in a place that is far away from that Kingdom in every respect imaginable.

And this holds for all eternity, forever. As in: this will never be different, even if it may seem to be so.

Matthew's first readers were members of a young, vulnerable Christian community under threat. Oppressed by the Romans, in conflict with their Jewish roots, often at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder of their time, longing for justice, for change, for a breather even that would enable them to heal, to grow, to gather strength. Their Lord as yet a crucified nobody, foolishness to the Greeks, a stumbling block to the Jews. For them the gospel paints an image of their Lord on the throne of eternity, establishing the standard of a different way of life, of his Kingdom come, of his reign. This is how it would be if Jesus had his way: The least, the poorest, the most vulnerable, the most insignificant would be first. They would take pride of place and everyone who'd looked after them would be promoted to higher glory and receive eternal reward for their actions. While those who trample the least, beat down the vulnerable, perpetrate injustices on the powerless will end up somewhere unpleasant far, far away.

Take heart you who are hungry for justice and thirsting for righteousness. Your King is near, his reality breaking into the here and now as we speak, growing a world that will be as different from

this one as goats are from sheep. Amen.