

A Message from our Rector

Today the Church celebrates the feast of Christ the King which is always the last Sunday of the Church year as the new church year begins next Sunday, Advent Sunday. The reading in today's gospel from St Matthew tells the story of the sheep and the goats. To sum the story up in a nut shell- the sheep are the good people who are invited to sit on the right hand, the good side while the goats are the bad people who are invited to sit on the left hand.

I have always been fascinated to discover exactly what the goats had done wrong to deserve this eternal damnation!

Historically, the left side, and subsequently left-handedness, was considered negative in many cultures. The Latin word sinistra originally meant "left" but took on meanings of "evil" or "unlucky" by the Classical Latin era, and this double meaning survives in European derivatives of Latin, and in the English word "sinister".

Meanings gradually developed from use of these terms in the ancient languages. In many modern European languages, including English, the word for the direction "right" also means "correct" or "proper", and also stands for authority and justice.

Perhaps this goes some way to explain the plight of the poor goats! Our understanding of a gospel passage can often be influenced by the translation or version that we read. I came upon this somewhat different interpretation of today's gospel recently.

"Then, the King said, "I was hungry and you told me that it was my own fault for being lazy and believing that I was entitled to help from hard working families and that I'd probably spent all of my money on alcohol, cigarettes and drugs anyway.

I was thirsty and you assumed that I was desperate for gin or vodka, rather than water.

I was naked and you said that I would have more chance of a job if I took more care of my personal appearance, even though I wore all I could afford. I was poor and you told me I was a scrounger who just wanted to sponge off the state and put stories about me on the TV and newspapers, despite knowing nothing about my circumstances. I was sick and you denied me any help, told me to go back to work and assumed I was faking illness in order to scrounge.

I was in prison and you demanded that the key was thrown away and that I was kept away from all respectable, law-abiding members of society because I was a bad person who could never change.

I was a stranger and you ran, scared of me and told me to go home, that your country was full and that I was only there to steal your money, possessions and jobs.

For I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did it to me.

³¹ “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. ³² 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, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.”

There is one word that should be in that opening passage but is not there and that is the word judgement which is a very unpopular word in modern Christianity. We would rather talk about being reconciled rather than being judged. This is the concept of Christ the King sitting in glory and, presumably, judgement over the world at the last day.

The background to today's gospel is that it was the last of three discourses from the Mount of Olives prior to the final days of Jesus' earthly ministry. It was a warning to the disciples about the future.

Warnings do not come any more clearly than that. The story is told of a preacher on this text, having read that section to his congregation asked them to indicate if they had given regularly to the food bank, to stand up if they had given clothing to the homeless, to stand up if they had been helping out at a soup kitchen or volunteered to be a prison visitor or help with young offenders. He reminded them that;

'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.' ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." Matthew 25: 45-46.

I am not going to ask you that question but it must have caused some uncomfortable moments. Perhaps as we approach the end of one year and look forward to another year in our church life this might be a time to look again at our lives and how we deal with and contribute towards helping those who need help. The stark reality of this story is that no matter how we dress it up, no matter what spin we put on it, the problem of need in our world will not go away and we will be judged not only for what we do but also for that which we did not do.

Thoughts and prayers

Godfrey