

Homily – 22-11-20 – Christ the King - Bishop Cam Venables

Readings: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25: 31-46

I think the Gospel reading today has the potential to make each of us feel uncomfortable for in it Jesus is remembered saying that at some stage we will be judged by him and held accountable for the way we have responded to human need. The text suggests that those who have responded with generosity and compassion will have eternal fellowship with God; while those who have been indifferent or mean... will be punished.

The criteria appears to be simple: *'When I was hungry you gave me something to eat, and when I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink; when I was a stranger you welcomed me, and when I was naked you gave me clothing; when I was sick you took care of me, and when I was in prison you visited me...'*but, there is an unsettling qualifier, *'Whenever you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'*

Over the years I've heard and read different interpretations of this passage, and I wonder what you make of it?

Some people suggest that the needs described are just spiritual needs and not physical. They argue that there is no need for us to attend to physical hunger and thirst, just spiritual hunger and thirst! However, I don't think the text says this but rather states we should respond to all kinds of need. Not just the spiritual hunger to be in relationship with God, but also the hunger to be physically fed; the emotional hunger to be loved; and the psychological hunger to flourish and belong.

Others have interpreted the phrase *'the least of these who are members of my family'* as being those who are part of the Christian family. So, they suggest, we should give priority to the needs of those in our congregation, our denomination, and our faith.

I have two reasons for disagreeing with this understanding. The first is that if we accept the insight, from the first creation story in Genesis, that all of humanity is made in God's image then could helpfully conclude we are each, and we are all, God's children. No matter what faith, language, or culture; no matter what political inclination, gender, or sexual orientation... we are all God's children. I am not suggesting we are all the same but I am suggesting we are all related to each other in God and that consequently all of humanity is equally deserving of care.

The second reason for disagreeing is that in his own ministry Jesus did not withhold God's blessing from people outside his faith. Among other examples remember that Jesus healed the servant of a Roman Centurion (Matthew 8:5-13), and the daughter of a Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28); and that he had a long and life-changing discussion with a Samaritan woman beside a well (John 4:1-28).

Interesting things to consider but what are the possible implication for us!

How would you and I go if we measured ourselves against the criteria described in today's Gospel? How are we using our gifts, abilities, time and resources: to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit those in prison?

I don't think we have to respond to each of these needs, but I do think we should be engaged with at least one! Some of you may already have a sense of which need you are responding to while for others you may be wondering what needs there are.

In this is the case then this question may give helpful focus, 'Where are the pain points in your community and mine?' Where are the old people who live isolated and lonely lives? Where do those who are unemployed gather in the long hours between dawn and dusk? Where in our community do

homeless people sleep, or get something to eat? Where do those who are sick find care? And, where do refugees and migrants find welcome and friendship?

Having named a few obvious possibilities, a further question to take us deeper is, 'What are the particular 'pain points' in your community and mine that move us?' And, that move us enough to do something in response.

Let's not kid ourselves! Responding to 'pain points' will regularly take us out of our comfort zones and may include single acts of generosity, as well as regularly our lives with people who come from different backgrounds to our own; those who understand the world differently to the way we understand the world; and who are sometimes not easy to get along with.

Why would we do this? Why would we deny our own desire for pleasure, comfort, and an easy life... to meet the needs of others? I think being clear about the 'why' is really important.

We could respond to human need because we want to earn credit in the eyes of the community, or God, but that doesn't sound sustainable or healthy. It's almost as though we would be exploiting a person for our own benefit rather than genuinely wanting them to flourish or be supported.

We could also respond to human need out of fear because we believe that God will punish us at some stage if we don't, but again that's not very healthy because, deep down, we'd resent it. It would be understood as being not what we WANT to do, but rather something we HAVE to do to avoid terrible consequences.

So... what's a better 'why?'

I think a better why is that in his ministry Jesus repeatedly responded to human need and each of the Gospels support this. So, we seek to emulate Jesus who demonstrated brilliantly an ability to love God and love neighbour. Jesus, who we remember today as 'Christ the King', gave priority to those in his society who were discarded, looked down upon and rejected. He cared for the lepers, the tax-collectors and the sex workers. He healed the broken and fed the hungry. He washed the feet of his friends and challenged the institutional self-interest of the Temple... and, we have the audacity to believe that he calls us to do the same.

I think this is a significant part of why we could and should respond to human need. But, in addition it's important to remember the continuing activity of Jesus, the Christ, in our time. Not just active in a little part of the world long ago, but God's Spirit currently active in our own community and lives. God's Spirit making it possible for us to be fed when we need sustenance; cared for when we're sick; welcomed even when we feel unworthy; and repeatedly set free...

When we bring this understanding and lived experience to our mind another reason to respond to human need becomes clear. We respond with generosity and compassion to human need because we are so grateful for the generosity and compassion we receive from God each day.

May God's Spirit bless your journey and mine, and may our lives be shaped by gratitude to the one we call friend and servant king, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen