

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me' " Matthew 25:40.

The courtroom is a favourite location for television series whether they cover real-life cases or are fictional. From Crown Court many years ago through to Judge Judy, they are watched in the expectation of seeing others made accountable for their actions and justice done.

On this Sunday before Advent we reach the last of our lectionary readings from Matthew for this year, before we move into Mark as our main Gospel for the year ahead.

Today's reading comes as the fifth of five consecutive teachings concerned with the way in which Christ's disciples are to live their lives in anticipation of his return, but without his physical presence. Thus far these teachings have encouraged them and us to be a people who are watchful, prepared, holy, and reliable...and today we also hear that there is accountability for the care given to those considered unimportant by the rest of society, as we discover that Jesus is to be found there.

Also in today's reading there is a strong theme of judgement, of accounting for what has been done in life, and it doesn't make for easy listening because, of course, we are not just observers of justice delivered to others! How much easier it is to watch and to criticise others, but here we are faced with the question of where amongst the sheep and the goats we might find ourselves.

My honest reply would be to say that I can find ourselves on both sides of the divide - at times doing what I can and what I should, at other times failing to do so. An honest reply would register my concern for the needs that are all around me, and also my fatigue or incapability of offering all that might or could be offered.

Fundamentally, this is not some sort of insurance policy that is being entered into. It is not about behaving in a certain way today, in the hope of what is to come, or the fear of what might come. When the care is given, it is given because need is present. It is given from a moved heart without any sense of calculation on the part of the giver. Indeed, they do not know they have done what is right for Christ until he tells them so.

Rather it is about the Spirit of God active within those who seek to follow Christ that inspires a desire to meet the needs of the poor and the hungry. In other words, perhaps this has to do with our mindset, our desire, our willingness to see people in a different way from the way of the World.

This response is not out of cold obedience to a law, or as a sop to our conscience, or as a policy taken out to insure our eternal lives, but because we are responding to the work of the Spirit which transforms us from within.

The King of Kings, Son of God, Messiah, identifies himself with the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned. Just as in his ministry, Jesus' life was in contradiction to the teachings of the time, as the King - and today is the Feast of Christ the King - came as servant to live amongst the needy, so we learn that he continues to live amongst us identified with the poor and needy.

Secondly, we cannot avoid the fact that our reading brings us hard words about judgement and its outcomes. We not only hear encouraging talk of eternal life, but also talk of eternal punishment. I suspect that many will find this difficult to say the least, and if we were meeting as a fellowship group, then a lively discussion could ensue. Perhaps, if you are part of an after-online-service coffee group you might like to have that discussion!

I would not, however, want us to be diverted from the key focus of our reading, which is not about the judgement placed on others, but where our responsibilities lie. And so we are reminded that our responsibility is to seek to love as Christ would love, to live as Christ lived.

And the judgement of which we read in this passage comes within the light shed by the whole Gospel. Within that whole Gospel we hear teachings which speak of grace and faith and salvation and forgiveness...and also judgement, and this whole gospel allows us to look forward with expectation, hope and with a degree, perhaps, of apprehension.

In the Gospel, the Good News, we remind ourselves that in the end our righteousness does not depend on our good deeds but on Christ, through whose grace salvation comes.

Grace from the one who on the cross spoke to the thief hanging next to him - the man considered as a nothing, and to whom Jesus promises salvation.

Grace which does not take away our responsibility to care as the parable teaches, but which fills our hearts with a desire to do so, and to see and seek the face of Christ in those around us.

This is the gospel of grace and not of law.

We continue to be challenged by the times and the world in which we live. Those who are hungry and homeless are around us, and as we seek to respond not out of law but out of love, may God, in his infinite strength and unending grace, continue to encourage and enable us his to love others as he has loved us. Amen.