

Sermon for Christ the King 2020

"¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶ for in^[a] him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible," Colossians 1.15-16.

Today we celebrate the festival of Christ the King. It is a day for considering the generosity and the great love that God has for us, and for responding to God through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. In the past it has often been referred to as Stir Up Sunday. In the first instance the collect begins with the cry to God to *"Stir up we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."*

As a result of the wording of this Collect it also became the day that families would prepare the Christmas pudding. The whole family would be involved as they stirred their prayers and Christmas wishes into the pudding. It was thought that when the pudding was served on Christmas day the prayers and wishes that had been stirred in would break free and come to fruition. Stir up Sunday. It is a lovely thought.

Mathew has recorded the prophecy that describes the humanity and the divinity of Jesus. The reading begins with the recognition of the divinity of Jesus. The Son of Man will come in his glory. The angels will be with him and Jesus will sit on the throne. He is king and he is the shepherd.

I am very fond of this reading, even though the judgment aspect is a little confronting. The separation of the sheep and the goats often brings to mind the possibility of being rejected by God. It is more likely that we will reject God, than God rejecting us. The end result is the same. If we reject God, it should come as no surprise that our meeting in person could be a little difficult.

While this looks to be black and white: that we are accepted or rejected; it is not that simplistic. Our Lord, having separated the goats and the sheep, invites the sheep to enter the kingdom. The criteria for entering the kingdom is straight forward. These are the people who have fed the hungry, given a drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited the prisoner.

The question is posed, "when did we do these things for you?" and the answer is straight forward. A life lived being conscious of the needs of others and responding to that need indicates a level of faith, and more than this, it a sign that faith is being lived.

The temptation is to understand this reading to mean that all we need to do for salvation is to care for the needy. It almost sounds as though a social conscience will be enough. Do good deeds and God will call us a sheep and place us on his right hand.

As in all matters of faith it must be much more than doing good deeds. People all over the world are doing good deeds all of the time. Does this mean that our Lord will place them on his right hand? Not necessarily. It is when our good deeds are generated by our faith that our chances of being on our Lord's right hand will increase. Our faith in God is exercised when it leads us to care for others.

When our Lord spoke in terms of the good deeds done it was very much an exercise in identifying the people of faith. It is interesting that the people of faith had not made any connection between their belief in God and the activities that Jesus identified.

“When did we see you hungry, thirsty, naked, in prison, or as a stranger?” As you did it to the least of these people you did it to me.

I have mentioned in other sermons here that we cannot earn our way into heaven. Our good works will not ensure a seat at Jesus right hand. The only thing that will open the pathway to heaven for us is our Lord Jesus himself. He is the one who has opened the door to heaven and invited us in. We accept that offer, or we reject it. The choice is ours. The gift is from God.

We take our example from Jesus. He is always focussed on the Father. As a result of his connection with the father he spent most of his time with the lepers, the sick, the crippled, the prostitutes and the tax collectors. He spent his time with the people in most need. His rationale is that he has come to save sinners, not the self righteous.

It does not take much imagination to recognise that the driving force for our Lord’s ministry was that of holy Love. Just as the love of God can flow through us, it first radiates from our Lord, and that love moves out from the cross and embraces all people.

Paul speaks of Jesus as the first born of all creation. In Jesus every thing was created. He is the head of the body, the church. Through Jesus, God reconciled himself to all things by the blood of the cross. This is quite heady stuff. But the best is yet to come. The blood of the cross is the means by which we are reconciled to God. We may be estranged from God, but God is always reaching out to us in love. This is the best understanding of the death and resurrection of Jesus. His sacrifice is for our salvation.

It is no accident that we refer to this feast as Christ the King. It is no accident that we view the kingship of Jesus as being above and beyond any kingship that we might have enjoyed on earth. Jesus is our leader, and he is our saviour. His example of love through faith is something that we are to acknowledge, and it is a manner of living in which we share.

The bottom line is that when we turn away the beggar or the stranger, we have turned away Christ. More than this, when we ignore the plight of people who are suffering, we have compromised the validity of our faith. *“Stir up we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”*