

“...anything you did for one of the least important of these, you did for me.” Mt.25:40

Our Calling as individuals and congregations is to serve God and Christ day by day. The Gospel reading today teaches us that we serve Christ, and thus God, through service to the “least important.”

“...ant thing you did
For one of the least important of these,
You did for me.”

That’s our text.

As the older versions put it:

“...inasmuch as you did it to the least important of these you did it for me.”

It is a mantra I commend to you. It is a mantra for us all.

The text, the whole Parable, gives priority to behaviour over beliefs. Or as it says in the Letter to James:

“..faith without works is dead.” James 2:26

That’s the challenge of our Gospel reading.

If you read the whole of Matthew 25 you will find that this is the challenge in all three Parables here:

- Five women who acted wisely are contrasted with those who foolishly did nothing [often called the Parable of the Wise Virgins];
- The one steward who acted by putting his talents to good use is contrasted with the two who did nothing with them;
- The just ones who served the “least important” are contrasted with those who did nothing.

All three Parables give priority to right behaviour:

“...faith without works is dead.”

Faith without actions is dead.

We are focussing on the Parable of the so called “Final Judgement.”

A Parable is a picture or a story which conveys a truth. The details in the picture/ story are often stark and vivid, in order to grab attention and drive home a truth, a message. The purpose of the details is not to give factual information, rather they are there to make a central point.

This Parable pictures the “Final Judgement.”

Just for a few minutes let’s imagine that the details here also give facts, in order to clearly understand the central message which is spelled out in verses 40 and 45, and paralleled in Matthew 10:40-42 and Mark 9:37.

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So picture the people of “all” nations gathered before “the King.” We can take that to mean everyone. Women, men, children, black and white, Christians, and atheists and agnostics, and people of Other Faiths too – Bahais, Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, Zoroastrians and so on. They’re all there. Note that.

All people are then divided into two groups, “ as a Shepherd separates the Sheep from the Goats.”

I often get singled out at Airport Security Checks. My bags get opened up and explored. On one occasion, some years ago, when this happened the Officers found in my bag a book on British Immigration policies. It is called “Sheep and Goats.” The Officers started reading it. It was about them and their work. They thought it was a laugh, and that I was odd to think that British Immigration Officers separate people and treat them like Sheep and Goats. We all know that Asylum Seekers get a raw deal.

So, there are people of all nations gathered at the Immigration Security Checks, at the Gates of Heaven, and people are divided as a Shepherd separates Sheep from Goats.

One day when I was visiting my mother we were sitting in the Kitchen. Someone knocked on the front door. My mother went to open it. She was faced with quite an aggressive Christian who made it clear in no uncertain manner that Christians go to Heaven and everyone else goes to Hell and burns eternally.

My Father had not long died.

So my mother asked the Evangelist at the door:

“My husband was a Sikh when he died. Is he with God or is he in Hell?”

“He is in Hell according to Scripture, replied the man at the door and then opened his Bible to Matthew 25 to prove it.

He explained that the King separates people into two groups. The Righteous [whom he took to mean Christians] go to Heaven, and the others [that’s the rest] go to Hell.

My mother then said, “If my husband is in Hell, then don’t try to make me into a Christian. I want to go to Hell too.”

She also said:

“I don’t believe God treats people like that. If he does I shall have a big argument with him at the gates of Heaven and say that he is unjust,”

My mother said all this in her very broken English.

I was impressed with her.

I was embarrassed by the Christian at the door.

I’m sure he was a sincere man, but people like him don’t make the Gospel or Christ either appealing or attractive.

In our text the people are not judged by their religious profession or beliefs.

No one is asked: Are you a Christian?

No one is asked: Do you believe Jesus Christ is uniquely the Son of God?

No one is asked: Are you a Methodist? Are you an Anglican? and so on.

No one is asked: Are you baptised in the Name of the Holy Trinity?

There is not a hint here of a Divine interrogation.

Judgement is not according to beliefs.

There is not a division which sends Christian believers into Heaven and the rest – including people of Other Faiths- into Hell.

Rather, in our text, the judgement is according to behaviour.

Action for justice.

The judgement is in favour of just behaviour, actions that are life giving. The judgement is against behaviour that is life threatening and life denying.

Think of all the divisions we know of on the basis of belief:

- Christian Denominations exist because of differing beliefs on such matters as Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.
- Denominations have divisions within them because of differing beliefs on such matters as Sexuality and Authority.
- There are divisions between different religions because of differing beliefs about God and Salvation.
- This can all spill out into daily life, and so there are divisions between women and men, black and white, Catholic and Protestant, Jew and Muslim and Hindu and Christian.

There is so much focus on belief and faith.

People tend to be divided or judged according to beliefs and faith. But faith divorced from action is hollow.

Salvation is a gift of Gods grace. But this is not the central issue in this Parable. If a point is made about Gods grace here it is that Gods grace is abundant beyond all our imagining. It is also clear here that there is no cheap grace.

There are many points of division.

Our text shows a way to solidarity as opposed to segregation and separation. We can unite in simple acts of justice and mercy; people of all denominations, people of all Faiths and Ideologies can unite over these goals set out so clearly by Jesus Christ. He calls for six actions:

- * feed the hungry;
- * give drink to the thirsty;
- * welcome and accommodate the stranger;
- * visit the sick;
- * visit the prisoner.

These groups of people are mentioned four times in the text in Matthew 25.

2000 years after these words were spoken they remain as relevant as ever. In a world that is far richer than it was 2000 years ago it is a scandal that there continue to be people who are hungry and malnourished; In the midst of all our concerns with floods it's a sobering thought that millions do not have a glass of clean water; in a world obsessed with fashion and designer clothes and littered with clothes shops, there remain people who are without clothes or dressed in rags; in a world of 50 million people who have lost the protection of their own countries, Britain and Europe have mean Immigration and Asylum policies; in a world of private medical health insurance millions do not even have access to a doctor or a health clinic; in a world obsessed with freedom, millions remain enslaved and unjustly imprisoned.

The Gospel does not require charity but justice.

There can be no greater motivation for Christian service for justice than this:

"...in as much as you do it to the least of these you do it for me."

Christ is encountered in the face of the poorest.

There are countless opportunities for this.

As you go from here,

Let your worship, learning, serving and mission continue each day through engagement with the "least important."

Get your congregation to identify with the "least important" in your neighbourhood and area...with those who are the most vulnerable, the most marginalised, the least listened to, the poorest.

Serve God in serving the least.

Serve Christ in serving the least.

Rabindranath Tagore said, "There rest your feet where rest the lowest, the lowliest and the least."

John Wesley said, "Go not to those who need you but to those who need you most."

Jesus Christ stated it like this:

"...in as much as you did it to the least of these you did it to me."

When we do this, we serve the present age, our calling to fulfil...and we serve Christ.