

Mthr Jenn's Homily for the Feast of Christ the King

One of my lowest marks for a course at university was not in nuclear physics or multivariable calculus but a course called Introduction to Poverty. On reflection, it's rather humorous. But lest I worry about what that might mean for my vocation, today's gospel comes to the rescue with the reminder that ultimately it's not about *what we know* about the poor around us, but *how we have responded, acted, and lived* our lives when we thought no one was watching.

This last Sunday of the Christian year, Christ the King Sunday as we affectionately call it, is the last Sunday we will hear from Matthew's gospel for some time. And perhaps it is no surprise on the heels of so many readings with Matthew's favourite phrase – 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' – that the gospel today seems to leave us comfortless. This passage is one of judgment and being sorted by Jesus' knowledge of our lives into sheep and goats, eternal life and eternal punishment. Matthew leaves no grey areas. He is clear who is in and who is doomed to gnash their teeth forever.

And yet, perhaps things are not entirely as straightforward as this. Because whatever else might distinguish these groups from one another, they each seem to be equally puzzled. For one, they don't seem to have expected to see Jesus up there on the throne looking completely at home, surrounded by the heavenly host. But more than this, the sheep didn't know they had done right any more than the goats knew they had done wrong. It's striking, in fact, how both groups ask the exact same question: When, Lord, did all of this happen? Jesus tells the sheep he is grateful for all they did to nourish, welcome, clothe, tend to, and be with him. But they cannot for the life of them recall ever doing any of that for Jesus. And the goats cannot for the life of them recall ever seeing Jesus anywhere, much less in need of anything. And as their sentences are handed down, both groups respond the same: we didn't know we would be judged for that. They are not judged on their church tradition or religious practices or their theology or creed or orthodoxy. The only criterion is how they responded to the need of their neighbours and the world around them; to the hungry, needy, and those they deemed less worthy of love.

And the crux of this for us is that if they didn't know, how will we know any better? How will we, how do we, know when we encounter Jesus? On that last day, when we too stand before Christ the King, will we join the favoured sheep or the doomed goats? These questions point us to two realities.

The first is to flag up our temptation to read this gospel and turn it into law. Feed one hungry person, welcome one stranger, clothe one naked person, visit a sick and an imprisoned one, and we will satisfy the requirements for eternal sheepdom. That is what it says. But this is a problem. We cannot just check off a list and we certainly cannot use people who we think are the last and lost and least so we can join the right herd. God sees and knows how we act when we think God is not around. But if this is true, where do we find the courage to go through the day without worrying about messing this up all the time? Without worrying about the reality that we are indeed judgmental and self-centred and self-righteous at times, especially in these present times when we are isolated and overwhelmed and anxious?

These are terrifying questions and ones that throughout our lives we will mess up. But part of being fully alive is learning from our many inevitable mistakes. If we aren't making any mistakes, we wouldn't have to worry about this difficult gospel, but we are probably not fully living our lives either. And yet perhaps we have to realise that we are not perfect before we can hear the good news in this gospel. The good news not that Christ is so present that he watches our every move and mistake, but the good news that Christ is so present that we have unlimited if not infinite opportunities to meet and to serve him. So then, how is it that we still miss out?

My guess is that we miss out because of the second reality this passage raises: that we don't actually live much of our lives in the present moment. Whether focused on the future and all that we want to do (or have to do!) to make up for lost time during the pandemic, or focussed on the past worried about what we should have said to someone or what we ought to have done last night or last week, in the end few of us live our lives as they happen to us. We use the past as an excuse for all the times we fall short. We tell ourselves that it's okay to snap at a friend or a colleague or to ignore our neighbour because we are stuck on what they did to us last week or even last year. And we all have that closet of good intentions and hopes that in the future we will be more focussed and will be a better friend, partner, or pray-er.

And yet when Jesus comes into our lives, he isn't in the past or the future but right now, in the present, waiting for us to pay attention. This seems to be the one thing the sheep get that the goats don't. They stop, they listen, they see and seek Christ in the other, now. They know the sanctity of the present moment and that where life is to be found, and lived, and loved is now.

Jesus isn't asking us to perform magnificent deeds and miracles. He doesn't tell us to heal the sick but to look after them. He doesn't tell us to set the prisoners free, but to visit them. Jesus asks for pretty ordinary things; when someone hungers for food or love, feed them. When someone thirsts for water or a shoulder to lean on, be there. When someone is imprisoned – even within themselves – reach out to them. When someone is vulnerable and exposed, clothe them. Jesus isn't asking us to solve global economics or cure all disease (although if we are able to do that, all the better!). Scripture is filled with the call to care for the most vulnerable in our world, but what it doesn't often tell us is that when we do this, God will be there. God is really and truly present in the needs of those around us and God also longs to meet our deepest needs, to bless our efforts to care for the vulnerable, and to be with all who are struggling.

At the heart of this gospel is a call to open our eyes and our hearts. Reaching out to those who are vulnerable in whatever ways that we can and acknowledging our own vulnerability can be scary. Both asks something of us and most certainly will take us out of our comfort zones. But then again, is this as frightening as the alternative? Of living only in ourselves? Of missing life as it happens to us or the chance to encounter God in and through our lives now? And perhaps most terrifying, of being surprised as we stand before Christ our King and realise that this is the first time we have ever seen him?