

The judgement of the nations

Community Engagement

Based on an address to St Gabriel's Fulbrook – 4 April 2025, Seeking the Kingdom on Foot

Matthew 25: 31-40

Verses 31-40 are only half of what the Son of Man says in the tremendous judgment scene of the 'sheep and goats' in Matthew 25; all the positive material here is then mirrored negatively in verses 41-46. This underlines for us how caring for other people is a most serious matter of salvation.

In reading these texts, one thing that stands out is the note of surprise in the reaction of both the 'sheep' and the 'goats': 'When was it that we saw you?', they ask. In the case of the righteous sheep, we recognise that people are acting in the way that they do simply to express their concern for others, not to calculate how they may best play in a system of rewards and punishments.

The actions of caring described here are the basis of what came to be known in Christian traditions as the 'corporal acts of mercy', which are also all based on Jewish practice. The addition to the six mentioned here of the burial of the dead gave the following list of seven: feeding the hungry; giving water to the thirsty; clothing the naked; sheltering the homeless; visiting the sick; visiting the imprisoned; burying the dead.

These are sometimes illustrated in Christian art, and they form the bedrock of Christian social engagement. They are all real challenges and opportunities in our own society today, and more widely in our world: it is important to remember that it is 'the nations' who are being summoned for judgment; there is a global dimension to our engagement.

So, on the one hand, our churches are often active in reaching out to our neighbours in the community, through such activities as food banks, places of welcome, building inter faith friendships and so on; when I went recently to our linked diocese of Hyderabad in Pakistan, I saw also how the provision of clean water is fundamental to transforming communities through a holistic approach to sanitation, healthcare, women's empowerment, and education. I also saw how all these activities need to be delivered in a safe way; I wonder if 'safeguarding' should be the Eighth Corporal Act of Mercy.

Pakistani Christians themselves are mainly from very poor backgrounds, and the way we read this passage becomes more complex when we realise that the phrase that 'the least of these' is Matthew's usual way of describing Christians. 'Members of my family' (or, in the original Greek, 'brothers') is almost a technical word in this gospel to name those whom the Lord has chosen. That being so, Jesus' comments here are not moral maxims, but pointers on the way to being

disciples. So, is the point of this passage really that the world is being judged by how it treats Christians?

That we face this problem of interpretation is a sign of the dilemma which we should really not be in. It is a sign that we have in fact become separated from our calling as a church when we think of 'poor people' as other than us. At the point in the conclave in March 2013 when the late Jorge Bergoglio was chosen as the next Pope, a Brazilian cardinal leant over to whisper to him: 'Jorge, remember the poor'. As Pope Francis, he certainly did that, speaking often of 'a church of the poor' – 'Ah, how I would like a church that is poor and for the poor', he would say.

At the heart of the matter, we need to engage with our communities, not in order to be rewarded or to be praised, but in order to find Christ there. This gospel passage speaks of the mystery of Christ's presence which is revealed to us when we find the Lord in those who are poor, and serve him there. In 1923, the redoubtable Frank Weston, Bishop of Zanzibar, addressed a great assembly of people at the Anglo-Catholic Congress. It was a time when there had been long and sometimes bitter struggles in the Church of England over forms of worship, and particularly over the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament in tabernacles on the altar. Believing as a devout Anglo-Catholic himself that this was undoubtedly a place where he could be assured of the presence of Jesus, Bishop Weston nevertheless went on to point to another form of the Lord's presence. His powerful rhetoric still speaks powerfully to us, particularly when we become too preoccupied with internal matters, summoning us to look outward in community engagement and find Our Lord there.

But I say to you, and I say it with all the earnestness I have, if you are prepared to fight for the right of adoring Jesus in His Blessed Sacrament, you must walk with Christ, mystically present in you, through the streets of this country, and find the same Christ in the peoples of your cities and villages. You cannot claim to worship Jesus in the tabernacles if you do not pity Jesus in the slum ... You have your Mass, you have your altars, you have begun to get your tabernacles. Now go out into the highways and hedges, and look for Jesus in the oppressed and sweated, in those who have lost hope, and in those who are struggling to make good. Look for Jesus in them; and, when you have found him, gird yourself with his towel of fellowship and wash his feet in the person of his brethren.

How do we respond to those who need our help in distress? Are we surprised to be blessed by them?

+Michael Lichfield