

Christmas 1
31/12/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Revelation 1:1-6a

Psalm 8

Matthew 25:31-46

The Judge Judged in Our Place

Sermon preached by Matt Julius

God, help me to say what is helpful, and help those that listen to judge what is not. Amen.

Those of you who follow the lectionary closely will have noticed that our Gospel reading for today has not been gone for long. A month ago the Christian liturgical year ended with the feast of Christ the King, and with it came our reading from Matthew 25. Today marks the end of the year within the civil calendar, and with it Matthew 25 is back.

And if it is back, let it come back with a vengeance.

In fact I mean that quite seriously.

The texts that accompany Matthew 25 today set the mood rather differently than the feast of Christ the King.

Our Psalm of praise expands our imaginations to a cosmic vision. Everything - all of creation - is caught up in the sovereign majesty of God. From the mouths of infants, to the moon and stars in heaven. Humans and beasts, over the earth and under the sea:

“O Lord, our Sovereign,

how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps. 8.9)

The persistent rhythms of this created order are expressed in today’s well-known reading from Ecclesiastes. There is a time for everything: living and dying, loving and hating, throwing stones and gathering stones, mourning and dancing, embracing and casting out. And standing above the constant hum of these rhythms of creation is the sovereign God. God who’s good gifts consist in our eating and drinking, and taking pleasure in work.

This background sets the scene of a God many people are familiar with. We have here a God that reflects much of what we confess in the first article of the creed: the article of God the Father, creator of Heaven and Earth. Who stands sovereign over the created world, seemingly at a distance.

And yet our psalm begins to question this distance: “what are human beings that [God] is mindful of them, | mortals that [God] cares for them?” (Ps. 8.4)

What is, dare I say, revealed, in our reading from the Revelation of John is precisely that this God is *not* distant. The home of God is among us. Our hope is that God will dwell with us, and we will be God’s people. The old rhythms of living and dying, mourning and dancing will be interrupted. And the sovereign rule of God shall come down into a new and renewed earth - a new creation.

Today, Matthew 25.31-46 needs to be read with this background in mind. We have a building sense of two things:

On the one hand, a grand vision of God's sovereignty over all of creation. The story we tell about God is cosmic, it expands to incorporate everything.

While on the other hand, this sovereign God seeks to dwell among humanity, this God seeks to embrace us as God's people.

God is at once very big, and at the same time very close.

The coming together of God's bigness and God's closeness finds articulation in Jewish and Christian eschatological hope.

Eschatological: a term referring to the end times. When the normal rhythms of our world will be interrupted. When all of this big wide world will be wound up. And when the God who stands sovereign over this world will become - all of sudden - very close.

In much of the Jewish and Christian traditions this coming close of God is thought to involve a significant amount of judgement. As it turns out not everything for which there is a time is good. As one quite well-known writer has suggested: "the time is out of joint."

And so when I suggested that Matthew 25 was back with a vengeance, I meant it. The whole chapter forces us to reflect on the quite harsh message of the Kingdom of Heaven - what other Gospels call the Kingdom of God. What we might simply refer to as the bigness of God coming close.

It is in Jesus that we see God closest of all.

And as God comes close in the ministry of Jesus many are left out in the cold.

The parables Jesus tells leave maidens wandering darkened streets for lamp oil, slaves have what little they have taken away. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, the wealthy and poorly dressed are shut out from a banquet. In today's reading, the careless are cast out, gnashing their teeth in everlasting torment.

Jesus meek and mild I think not.

Jesus' teaching cannot be understood as saying that there is no inside, and no outside. Jesus does not fail to give voice to eschatological judgement. Jesus does not fail to take seriously what it means for the bigness of God to encounter us closely, bringing with it judgement.

In light of these teachings about judgement many commentators note that what is distinctive about Jesus is the basis of his judgement. Unlike the religious leaders of his day, it is not righteous adherence to religious law that will sway the judge. Rather, it is love: enacted love is what sets some aside for embrace and others for casting out.

And so we have inherited a tradition marked by the command to love others.

But, we might ask: a command to love who? Who are the others?

In the most exhaustive study of the interpretation history of this text Sherman Gray sheds some surprising light on answers to this question.

Up until the 8th century, less than half of commentators addressed the question of who we are called to love in Matthew 25. But of those that do: only 13.5% suggested we are called to love everyone -- 86.5% suggest we are only called to love other Christians.

This overwhelming majority continues through the middle ages and into the modern era.

When I first discovered this I found it unsettling, to say the least.

Could the command to love really be so narrow in its focus?

Perhaps, the Gordian knot of this parable is not so easily untied.

The standard interpretation of this parable calling us to the command to love locates us at the centre of the parable. It is our moral virtue - wittingly, or more likely unwittingly - that counts in the end. In this we are at risk of losing the cutting edge of judgement that has run through this entire chapter - and many of Jesus' parables.

Have we forget so quickly that we ourselves are under judgement?

Have we forgotten that we are the needy; we are the least.

We are the maidens left wandering darkened streets, slaves who have what little we have taken away. The wealthy shut out from a banquet. We are the careless gnashing their teeth in everlasting torment.

Christians *are* rightly the recipients of the command to love: for we are the needy; we are the least. And if it were a test of moral virtue we would almost certainly all be goats.

It is when we realise that we are such needy people as these that God comes the closest of all. We are not the righteous, following the command to love out of righteousness. We *ourselves* are the needy that *receive* love out of unrighteousness.

We see Christ in our experiences of suffering and loss when we remember that Christ too experienced suffering and loss on the cross for us. Suffering and loss we remember with cup and bread.

As we see ourselves as the least, we see a God big enough to hold our weakness, and close enough to care.

We see from behind the closed door the resurrected Christ - who passes through that door towards us.

As we see ourselves as the least, we see Christ as the big God who comes close, by himself becoming least.

We *can* take from this a moral lesson, indeed that same lesson of love. But no longer out of our own righteousness. No longer our means to sway the judge. For the judge is judged in our place. In today's reading Christ the judge literally stands in our place.

Our love flows from our being loved. Our giving from our receiving the love of God. Love follows the way of Jesus, the way of the cross. It is our means of becoming like Christ, like the one who too became least.

And so if we are to find ourselves wandering the streets in darkness, let us clothe those we find there. If we find ourselves shut out from a banquet, let us provide food and drink for

those also outside. If even what little we have is taken away, let us take ourselves to visit and care for the sick and incarcerated.

If we are to fall under judgement, let us follow the way of the judge who is judged in our place -- let us follow the way of Christ, the way of the cross, the way of love. *Amen.*
