

Reign of Christ Sunday

Matthew 25: 31-46

At the latest Worship committee meeting we were talking about the Advent/Christmas season, and in particular we talked about the music. Whether or not we should start singing Christmas carols at the beginning of Advent. It was a good discussion. The details aren't important for the purposes of this sermon, but it got me thinking.

Once Advent begins, and we start the Christmas preparations, the whole focus of our thinking shifts to Bethlehem. If someone were to ask, during this season: "Who is Jesus?" – we'd most naturally say that Jesus is the one born in Bethlehem, and the whole story, the baby, the star, the shepherds...would be part of that. Jesus, the baby born in a manger.

Well, this is the last Sunday before all of that begins. And Matthew gives us a real gift. It's as though he's saying: *"Look – before you focus all your attention on that baby, let me show you who else he is. Let me show you who that baby grew up to be, and what he said about life and what he did about life. Yours.*

Let me show you that. Then you can spend all the time you need looking into that manger, because you'll see there not only the child but the man – not only the man but the very face of God. Come, and see."

And he shows us a picture. An image – with sights and sounds and feelings – and the picture is of Jesus, giving his last teaching to his friends before he goes to be crucified. Imagine that. Matthew has written his gospel so that Jesus is teaching, teaching, teaching...and he does that by what he says and what he does and who he is...

And the time is short – he knows he won't be with them forever, (not in the flesh anyway) and he wants to much for them to understand and absorb all of his words and all of HIM that they can before it's too late.

And he tells them stories and teaches them to pray and asks them questions and teaches them to trust in themselves...

And it all builds up to this. THIS is the very last thing he tells them before the events of Holy week begin – before he goes to die.

Are we meant to see this as a summary, do you think? As a review? As the final punch line to what it's all about? Does it feel that way to you? Listen again as I read it – listen, knowing that these are his last words to them before they go to the last supper. Does knowing that make a difference to how you hear it?

31-46

Matthew has been building up to this for three weeks now. Chapter 25 tells us the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, then the parable of the talents from last week, and finally today's text. I think

they should be read together, really, like a 3 act play. A three point sermon. A volley, set and spike. However you express it, they go together.

First is the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids – remember? (READ 1-13)

To me, this is a warning to those of us who think we're not in this for the long haul. The ones who were in trouble here were not prepared to wait it out through the night – the ones who had prepared for a long night had made the right choice. This is a lifetime's work, being faithful. We don't get instant understanding or instant fixes here – figuring out who you are and what you can become – figuring out who Jesus is for you and how best to live your life and what God has gifted you for and is calling you to....this is exciting, hard, joyful work, and it takes your lifetime. So...get prepared – we're in this for the long haul. We need lots of oil to see us through while we wait and watch. We're going to be a while.

Now: we know from elsewhere in scripture, that God provides oil that does NOT run out, I want that to be really clear. Also....we're told that at that time, oil was used as a symbol of good deeds. HMMMM how does all of that fit together? I'm not sure, but I think Matthew is saying that we need to prepare for God coming into our lives and into the world, we need to prepare for that by doing what's right, by responsible deeds of discipleship AND by being prepared to be at this for a long long time.

That's not a complete message though, because you still want to say

But wait – I don't get it – tell me more.

And he does. "Well" he says, "it's like this"

14-30

Does that help clarify things?

Hmmm yes

And no.

The master it says, is a harsh man. So that's clearly not God.

So...the point of this must have to do with the behaviour of the servants. And the ones who were rewarded were the ones who took risks. Who acted boldly despite the danger, and in the face of the unfairness of the master.

So: If I'm understanding this so far, Matthew wants us to know that the best way to prepare for God and God's reign and realm in the world is to keep lots of oil in our lamps, (that is, be ready to do deeds of discipleship and keep on doing them) AND that those deeds must involve risk taking and bold action even when the danger is great. Hiding from the hard stuff – shrinking back from risky situations – just doesn't cut it.

Ok – but what exactly ARE the deeds of discipleship and what actions, what situations, do we need to take risks in?

And this is where he tells us. And it all falls into place.

Feeding the hungry. Clothing the naked. Visiting those in prison. Looking after those who are sick. These are the acts. This is what it boils down to. It's not fancy and it's not glamorous. And in our hearts, we knew it all the time.

And he offers us this vision to help us understand.

Verse 31 – this is not the end of time this is the consummation of his life and ministry. This is the cross. The throne of his glory is the cross.

Verse 32 – and in the face of that cross, a separation will be made. Everyone in the world has to face that man on the cross and choose to see there the face of God, or not.

My favourite part of this is the separation of the sheep and goats. In those days, it turns out, shepherds separated the sheep from the goats at night time, put them into separate pens or folds....and in the morning, gathered them again into one flock. **IN THE MORNING THEY WERE STILL ONE FLOCK AND THEY STILL HAD ONE SHEPHERD.**

This is the concept that for me overrides the rest – the shepherd is still the shepherd of the sheep **AND THE GOATS** even though the separation at night was necessary.

Does this make you think of the night that the bridesmaids had to wait through? That story never did get to what happened in the morning, did it?

The separation happens here, not at the end of time but at the cross, and in the response that we make or do not make when we are confronted by it. Can we see that “when the son of man comes....” that is when he is crucified. This in fact is the triumph of God – the throne of his glory **AND THAT LIKEWISE IN EVERY SUFFERING PERSON** in every needy rejected face is also the face of Jesus, still suffering and still triumphant?

And that **THIS** Jesus, is the one who is shepherd and who will judge...and that when in a few short weeks we look into the manger

What we see there will be the beginning of all this yet to come?

This has been a hard sermon to write and a difficult text to grapple with. It's exciting, it's challenging and very real.

May God bless you as you continue to keep watch, risking boldly to prepare for God and keep facing the cross and those who still suffer

Knowing absolutely that it is there that God is to be found.