

Sermon 22 November 2020

Matthew 25:31-46

This is one of the most vivid parables Jesus ever spoke, and the message is very clear – God will judge us in accordance with how we respond to the needs of others. His judgment does not depend on the fortune we might have amassed, the fame we might have acquired, the knowledge we might have gained, but on the help we give to others.

I did refer to this particular passage a few weeks ago in relation to how in helping others we help God and so experience something of God. You might remember the story I told of Martin the shoemaker. Today we are looking at this passage in the context of helping others and how that impacts on how we feel about ourselves.

The first point to make is that the examples of helping that Jesus gives are quite simple things that any one of us could do – giving a hungry person something to eat, a thirsty person something to drink, hospitality to a stranger, clothes to a needy person, visiting someone who needs a little tlc. This is quite typical of the nature of Jesus's parables – they are about the simple things in life, things that anyone can relate to. He speaks to you and me in our everyday lives. There is nothing really grand involved in terms of applying ourselves to God's service. It is really about attitude and being prepared to help others in any small way we can. However, the sum total of that can be quite significant. In other words, if we all have that attitude, we will contribute to a community where everyone feels cared for and valued.

The point is this, small gestures can make a difference. We all know how a gesture of kindness, of friendliness can lift our spirits. You would all know the story of the man throwing starfish back into the sea, but let me tell it again, because it really does encapsulate the essence of the point being made here.

A man was wandering along a beach when he saw in the distance someone approaching him and as he went along he was bending down at regular intervals, picking something up and tossing it into the sea. As he drew near, he saw that it was a little starfish that had been washed up on to the beach that he was throwing into the sea. When he reached him, he said, 'Why are you bothering? There are thousands of those little starfish on this beach; what difference can you possibly make?'

The stranger bent down, picked up another starfish and threw it into the sea, and smiling, said, 'Well, it sure made a difference to that one.'

Every smile you give, every word of encouragement or love, every gesture you make that shows you care, makes a difference to someone. It also, I believe, cements our relationship with God. *'God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.'* 1 John 4:16. Jesus is making this point very clearly in our Gospel passage.

There are three ways in which we can come face to face with, can come to know Christ. We find him in the Bible. In reading God's word, he is presented to us, he comes alive.

We find him through prayer. It is through prayer that we open ourselves to him and ask him to speak to us and to touch our lives.

And thirdly, we meet him when we care for others. In following his commandment to love one another, in putting into practice everything he stood for and teaches us, we encounter Christ.

Lastly, let us remember this, it is not what we say but what we do that matters, that will determine our experience of Christ. I repeat that wonderful verse, 1 John 3:18, *Dear friends, let us stop just saying we love each other; let us really show it by our actions.* I finish with another short story to illustrate that.

Once upon a time, a distinguished minister of the Church of Scotland dreamed he had died and was on his way to heaven. He arrived at the Pearly Gates where he met St Peter. He said to St Peter, 'You know, I am the minister who preached to those large congregations Sunday after Sunday at St Andrew's.'

St Peter said sadly, 'Actually, we've never heard of you.' Then he added, 'But are you by any chance the man who, whatever the weather, used to go out into his garden every morning and feed the sparrows? And when the man replied that he was indeed that man, St Peter said, 'Come in, the Master of the sparrows wants to thank you.'

Our relationship with God and Jesus is dependent not upon words but upon our actions. And those actions don't have to be grand gestures.