

Sermon 13 June 2021 Matthew 25 Challenge

Matthew 25:31-46

Today we explore this Gospel passage in light of the World Vision Mathew 25 Challenge. I want to begin by looking at this passage in the context of justice. Justice is something every society, every community strives for. Our vast, and at times rather convoluted, law and order systems are all about justice. Every day in the news there are examples of the system at work. This week's massive international drug bust is but one example, and very much at one end of the spectrum. Traffic offences are at the other end.

Justice is about maintaining some balance. A very important point to make here is that true justice is not just about punishment. True justice carries with it a sense of reward for deeds or behaviour which benefits others as well as punishment for misdeeds. This point is made by Jesus in the last verse of this passage. *'And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'*

Now it is interesting that both punishment and reward in this instance are taken care of in the afterlife. There is no doubt that life is not always fair. Those that inflict pain and suffering, at times, appear to get away with it. You know the expression, 'to get away with blue murder.' You probably don't know the origin of that expression. Murdering a royal person was regarded as the ultimate crime. If you committed that offence, you were more than likely to be hunted down and severely punished. Royals were referred to as 'blue blooded,' hence the term 'blue murder.' So if you somehow managed to avert being apprehended and punished, you were considered to have 'got away with blue murder.'

Anyway, innocent people often suffer through absolutely no fault of their own. If we look simply at this physical life, that balance I have referred to is often missing. However, I believe we have to look at the complete picture, and this involves both this life and the next life. I believe that the scales of justice will be balanced when we all come before God to be judged.

We heard Paul making this point in our first reading from Romans. *'For he will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury.'*

Paul also makes this point in 2 Corinthians 5:10. *'For we all must stand before God to be judged. We will each receive whatever we deserve for the good or evil we have done in our bodies.'* Notice he says 'good or evil'. Jesus makes exactly the same point in this story. Those who care for others receive eternal life, those that don't are banished into darkness.

This raises another very interesting point. Notice that those who are punished have not actually inflicted suffering on others, but rather they have refused to come to the aid of

those who are suffering. In other words, theirs is a sin of omission rather than commission. By not coming to the aid of those in need, we are guilty.

When asked to care for our neighbour, we can respond in a variety of ways. It could be that we profess to be too busy – we just don't have the time. That actually means, of course, that we have other priorities, but I won't go into that right now. If it is case of financial help, we could profess to not having enough money. We could profess that those suffering have themselves to blame and don't really deserve our help. We can always find an excuse. That is the sin of omission.

On the other hand, we could respond by being prepared to make some sacrifice and doing whatever we can to alleviate any suffering there might be. We can put ourselves out. And we will be rewarded. That might be in this life, it might well be in the next life.

A point here with regards Matthew's gospel. Matthew's gospel focuses on Jesus as the Messiah, as the anointed king of God's people. The king was responsible for laying down the law and obligations of the people. To be a member of God's kingdom, Jesus lays down our obligations in two very simple commandments – to love God and to love our neighbour. These two commandments are inextricably entwined and this point is beautifully made in this story when the king says, *'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'* When we serve others, we serve God. Francis of Assisi took it a step further by saying that when we serve others, we worship God.

The underlying message of this passage is that by our obedience to God, to his commandments, we are judged worthy or unworthy to participate in the kingdom of God. Now that is laying down a challenge for us! Let me finish with a story.

Once a village blacksmith had a vision. The angel of the Lord came to him and said, 'The Lord has sent me. The time has come for you to take up your abode in his kingdom.'

'I thank God for thinking of me,' said the blacksmith, 'but the season for growing crops will soon be here. The farmers will need their ploughs repaired and their horses shod. I don't want to seem ungrateful, but do you think I might put off taking up my abode in the kingdom until I have finished?' The angel looked at him in the loving way that angels do and said, 'I'll see what can be done.'

The blacksmith continued with his work and was almost finished when his neighbour fell ill right in the middle of the planting season. The blacksmith came to his aid and at about the same time the Lord's angel appeared to him again. The blacksmith pointed to the fields he was planting for his neighbour and pleaded, 'Do you think eternity can hold off a little longer? If I don't finish this job, my neighbour's family will suffer.' Again the angel smiled and vanished.

Over the next few months other people encountered problems and the blacksmith always stepped in to help. Whenever the angel reappeared, the blacksmith just spread his hands in gesture of resignation.

One evening the blacksmith began to think about the angel and he had put him off for such a long time. Suddenly he felt very old and tired and said, 'Lord, if you would like to send your angel again, I think I would like to see him now.' No sooner had he spoken than the angel stood before him. 'If you still want to take me,' said the blacksmith, 'I am now ready to take up my place in the kingdom of the Lord.'

The angel looked at the blacksmith in surprise, smiled and said, 'Where do you think you have been all this time?'

I urge you to consider taking part in the World Vision Matthew 25 Challenge. It is a tool, a guide to doing something about playing our part in the functioning of God's kingdom. It is a challenge, but then we all know that working for God, being a disciple of Christ does call for a degree of sweat, discipline and commitment.