

Sermon 10 September 2023

Matthew 25:31-46 1 John 3:14-20

This is one of the most vivid parables that Jesus ever related. There are two very clear messages.

Firstly, God will judge us according to 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 purely and simply on the help we give to others.

Jesus gives examples of helping others and the interesting point here is that they are quite simple things that any 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. As is always the case with his parables, Jesus speaks to us in our everyday lives. There is nothing really grand 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.

Another important point here: our reaching out to others must be spontaneous and come from the heart. If that is the case, then invariably we will receive something back (the more you give, the more you receive). But if we expect something in return, our attitude is all wrong and we will simply not receive anything back. That is how life works.

Someone once said, *'Always judge a person by the way they treat someone who can be of no possible use to them.'* I have no idea who said that but I believe Jesus would say 'Amen' to that. And I remind you of that wonderful quote from Winston Churchill, *'We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.'*

The second message from this parable is that when we give a helping hand to those in need we experience something of God. This happens because of two reasons. Firstly, we are carrying out his commandment to 'love one another,' and secondly, because God is part of every one of us, so when we help someone, we are, in effect, helping God. Let me remind you of the story of Martin the shoemaker.

Martin was an elderly shoemaker who lived in Russia. One night as he was sitting in his chair reading his Bible, he fell asleep. In his sleep he heard a voice, 'Martin! Martin! Be on the lookout tomorrow for I am coming to visit you.' He woke up in great excitement as he was convinced it was the Lord speaking to him.

The next day, as he worked on his shoes, he kept looking out the window, expecting to see the Lord. As the day wore on, the Lord failed to appear, but he did manage to see a few people who needed some help. He invited into his home for a cup of tea an old man who was sweeping away the snow in the street and was struggling. He also invited in a young mother with a baby, who was obviously very poor and very cold. HE gave her a cup of soup and an old shawl. He helped another elderly woman who was struggling under the weight of a large bundle of firewood.

At the end of the day, he felt good about what he had done for these people but was disappointed that the good Lord had not visited him. He put his tools away, has some supper and sat down to read the Bible. As he did so, he heard a voice, 'Martin, it is I,' and in the dark corner of his room he saw an image of the old snow sweeper. Again he heard the voice, 'Martin, it is I,' and again he saw an image. This time it was of the young woman with the baby. Once more, he heard the voice, 'Martin, it is I.' Once more an image, this time the elderly woman carrying the basket of firewood.

Martin then reached for his Bible and it fell open at the Matthew 25 passage, which he read finishing with the words, *“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.”* Martin then realised that the Lord had indeed visited him in the form of the people he had helped, and through reaching out to them, he had encountered God. He was a happy man.

St Francis of Assisi took this belief to another level. He believed that not only do we experience God when we lend a helping hand to others, but there is also a sense of worship involved. This belief lay in his experience when he came across a leper. He had always been repulsed by lepers but on this occasion he dismounted from his horse, embraced and kissed the leper. He remounted his horse, turned to farewell the leper but the leper had just vanished into thin air. He realised that in embracing the leper, he had in fact embraced God. This was a ‘road to Emmaus’ experience and a significant point in his conversion.

I cannot emphasise enough this whole idea that giving something of ourselves lies at the heart of what it means to be an upholder of the Christian faith. I refer to our first reading in which John says, *‘Dear friends, let us stop just saying we love each other; let us really show it by our actions. It is by our actions that we know we are living in the truth, so we will be confident when we stand before the Lord.’* 1 John 3:18-19.

But it goes beyond the confines of the Christian faith, and this is where Jesus is so relevant to the lives of everyone, no matter where our faith may lie. The commandments he gives us are pertinent to making a life meaningful, period. Everything we have been talking about – reaching out to others, giving a helping hand to those in need – emanates from his simple commandment to ‘love your neighbour.’

What did Winston Churchill say? *‘We make a living by what we get. We make a life by what we give.’* Martin Luther King said, *‘Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, What are you doing for others?’* Ben Carson, neurosurgeon, author and politician, and a man of great faith, said, *‘Happiness doesn’t result from what we get, but from what we give.’*

These statements are about what makes life meaningful. They are not quotes from scripture but they reflect, they express just exactly what Jesus Christ is trying to convey to us through his teaching and direction. The message here is, by taking him on board, life becomes meaningful in more ways than one.

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