

## Sermon 26 November 2023

### 1 John 4:16-21 Matthew 25:31-40

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 other. 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 this impacts on how we feel about ourselves, and also our relationship with Christ.

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' 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, as we have frequently said, 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. I am sure you are familiar with 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 to him, '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, of love, every gesture you make that shows you care, makes a difference to someone. And that can snowball.

Many years ago, I was reading that well-known book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, by Norman Vincent Peale. Peale recounted an incident he experienced with a taxi driver. As he was being picked up, he observed this taxi driver call out a cheerful greeting to at least two people who appeared to be total strangers.

When he got into the taxi and they were under way, he said to the driver, 'I noticed you greeting people who appeared to be strangers. That is a very positive thing to do.' The driver replied, 'Well, I look at it this way. Every time I greet someone cheerfully, it more than likely lifts their spirits, and if that puts them in a

good mood, it means that more than likely they will in turn be nice and cheerful to the people they interact with, and so on. Before too long, that sense of well-being has multiplied to the extent that countless people will have benefitted from that one initial cheerful greeting.'

Kevin Heath, Jamaican gospel singer, puts it very well, *'No act of kindness is too small. The gift of kindness may start as a small ripple that over time can turn into a tidal wave affecting the lives of many.'*

Another very important point is that this attitude cements our relationship with God. I quote from our first reading, *'God is love, and all who abide in love, abide in God, and God abides in them.'* 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 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.

Let's remind ourselves, it is not what we say but what we do that matters, that will determine our experience of Christ. Another story for you.

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 the 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 sparrows wants to thank you.'

Let me give you two pertinent quotes. Firstly, from William Wordsworth, *'The best portion of a good person's life is their little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love.'* And the final word to Aesop, the great Greek story-teller, *'No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.'*

Let me finish by making this point. Our relationship with God and with Jesus is dependent not upon words but upon our actions, and those actions don't have to be grand gestures.

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