

'The Least of These'

(Matthew 25:31-46)

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory." (Matthew 25:31)

It too easy to become more cynical as the years go by, because we think that we have heard it all before. Yet, even the most bitter and twisted amongst us can be surprised by life. This is probably the reason why most people like to hear a good tale, whether that be from a bestselling novel, or a Hollywood 'blockbuster', or that 'ripping yarn' told to us at the bus stop.

The parables of Jesus can sustain our faith. These parables are not simply moral tales, they are 'parallels in prose' which told up to the moment, often with a punchline which knocks us flying. In other words, Jesus' parables are short stories which contain more truth than 24 hour media coverage because they are telling tales of a parallel reality: God's Kingdom on earth, a New World of justice, peace and love.

So here in Matthew 25 is a parable of the 'Last Days', when we are held to account. *"All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people from one another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats."* (v.32) The last part of this verse may sound rather strange to us; even we 'city dwellers' can tell the difference between a sheep and a goat, but that is because we are used to them being kept differently. But, throughout the centuries, in the Middle East both animals are treated the same, which means that you cannot tell the difference – at first glance. So you have to look closer. Remembering that we are not actually talking about sheep and goats, Jesus continues by saying that the Son of Man will look closer at their lives.

Earlier this month I attend the opening of the Newbegin Centre in Winson Green. The afternoon workshop was led by a Christian activist called Dave Andrews, who was the founder of a Christian community in Brisbane, Australia called the

Writers' Union. Dave explained the name by saying that they were waiting upon (expecting) God, and waiting on (serving) their neighbours. He went on to talk about this parable of the sheep and the goats, saying that this story of Jesus defines the very terms on which our lives are judged. *"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."* (v.v.35-36) Dave Andrews continued, "This is not about healing the sick and raising the dead!", rather these are cations within our grasp, they are achievable, doable.

Today is Racial Justice Sunday, and the theme for this year is 'Hospitality and Sanctuary for All'. The materials have been written by Rev Dr Inderjit Bhogal, who states that "Migration is a crucial contemporary issue":

"The next twenty/thirty years will see huge movements of people as a result of environmental degradation, climate change, famine, war and persecution. It is a sign of our times and we are required to pay attention to it.

... There is a challenge here to consider working to make your city, town, village, church, school, college, university, club or place of work, a Sanctuary committed to building cultures of welcome and hospitality, especially for those in greatest need and danger. Primarily, this is a commitment to helping make the most vulnerable people among us safe from harm.

How we relate to each other, and in particular to people seeking sanctuary and safety will be central to humanity. How we treat those who are in greatest need for safety will be the measure by which we shall judge personal, national and international morality and spirituality."

Well, the time has come to act, as the Refugee Crisis becomes a humanitarian disaster.

After this morning's service we will be holding a Church Meeting when we will be considering our partners for the redevelopment of Dale House. There are proposals from YMCA and Hope Projects to convert the rooms in Dale House, which is part of our church centre, back into accommodation, and both offer opportunities to support some of the most vulnerable people in our society. The

challenge is, in light of this parable of Jesus, 'who are the least of these?' – those at the bottom of the pile who live at the brink of our world, because they are the very people who define us.

Just as the parable of the Great Feast inspired our Street Banquet, so this parable of the Last days is a key text for us today, because it asks us as individuals and as a Church, 'who are Jesus for us?' and "how are we waiting on them?"

No, we haven't heard it all before, because life can surprise us, especially when we hear the stories of whose people who stand before us. (v.40) *"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these . . . you did it to me."*

Neil Johnson
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