

Doing nothing

So today, on this Sunday, we end a journey as we reach the end of the Christian year. Just under a year ago, December 1st 2019, was the first Sunday in Advent when we began once again to tell the story of the fulfilling of God's promises in the coming of the baby Jesus. Now, as we stand poised for the first Sunday in Advent 2020, the year ends with a vision of Christ – not now the tiny baby in a manger but the sovereign Lord judging the nations of the earth. This Sunday has also become known in some parts of the Christian Church as Christ the King Sunday, or Reign of Christ Sunday, and that is because in 1925 the then Pope, Pius XI, looked around at the world of his day and saw disturbing signs: he saw the emergence of nationalism and Fascism and rampant secularism – some things never change - and he considered that the end of the Christian Year, was a good time to remind people of the Lordship of Christ.

Today we turn, then, to this portrayal of the end of this world, when Christ comes to judge and to finally set things right. And it is important to note that this is not a description, it's a vision. So we are in the realm not of the newsreel but of the imagination, albeit imagining with our limited means something that will one day take place. And the nations are depicted assembled before the Son of Man, the title Jesus used for himself. And the nations are pictured as sheep and goats and the Son of Man divides them to his right and left according to those who have fed him when he was hungry, given him a drink when he was thirsty, welcomed him as a stranger, clothed him and visited him when he was a prisoner – and those who have not. And when those on his right ask him when they did these things to him, he replies that in caring for one of the least – the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the prisoner – they were doing it to him. And vice-versa, those on his left are told that in failing to care for these vulnerable and suffering people they failed to care from him.

Well, this is a passage that has had a big impact on the Christian church over the centuries, for caring for the poor and the vulnerable, the establishing of hospitals and alms houses has always been an important part of Christian witness. Indeed those women known as the Beguines who were established right here in the Begijnhof back in the 13th century and who once used this church were devoted to these very purposes, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if this passage from Matthew 25 was one of the Bible texts that inspired and motivated and them.

There is a question, however, about who Jesus is referring to here, 'the least of these' who are hungry and thirsty and naked and strangers and in prison. There's a strong case for saying that when Jesus speaks here of his family he is referring to his followers, his disciples who after his death and resurrection he will send out into the world. They will be very vulnerable in an often hostile world and they will go hungry and thirsty and they will be as strangers in the world and often imprisoned, and Jesus is saying that as they are sent out in his name and on his mission so those who tend and care for them will be tending and caring for him. So this is not about the poor and the hungry generally. This is about his Jesus' poor brothers and sisters, his missionaries who will face trials and dangers. And scholars debate this but I would suggest that we hold both interpretations together. Jesus is referring primarily, in the first instance, to his own disciples, but from there it spills over to all who feel the world's cold shoulder, all who suffer at the world's hands and endure poverty and deprivation. This is the extraordinary paradox of the Christian faith: the Maker, the One who rules over all, who holds the nations in the palm of his hand bears the scars of crucifixion's shame and therefore is to be found in the very least of these. This Christ straddles the very highest halls of heaven and the waste places of earth.

So what are we to make of this multi-layered vision? Well, today I want to focus particularly on the goats, on those who are cast to the left hand of the Son of Man, those who did not reach out Christ in 'his distressing disguise', as Mother Teresa of Calcutta described them. They are the ones who did nothing. They are the ones who were at ease in the world and who failed those who are not. And the first thing to be said of them is that they are not necessarily wicked or evil people. Their fault is not that they are great sinners: they aren't thieves or murders or tyrants. Their sin is

simply that they did nothing. But of course as the philosopher Edmund Burke put it, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good (people) to do nothing.” And here we encounter the fact that there are two kinds of sin: what we call sins of commission and sins of omission. And sins of commission are the ones that stand out. They are easy to identify. These are the sins of law-breakers and they stand out for all to see. They are easily recognisable. But sins of omission are far more subtle. Usually you are judged for what you do, not for what you don’t do. And I wonder why they did nothing and there may be several reasons.

For a start it is easy to feel that the problems of the world are just too big for us to handle. The world, after all, is ordered such that there is what we call structural sin. The whole system is stacked such that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and it is very hard indeed to change that. Recent elections not just in the USA but also in the UK and elsewhere have revealed a growing underclass of people who feel that they are marginalised and no longer have stake in society. And the phenomenon that we call globalization, based on free trade and unregulated markets has contributed to this and to a world that is skewed towards the haves and away from the have-nots. Climate change has also contributed towards this. The destructive effects of rapacious economies are bringing ecological destruction that disproportionately affects poorer nations, sucking them into a whirlpool of deprivation. And we look with disdain on what we call ‘economic migrants’ who are derided because they come searching for a better life and a fairer share of the world’s riches. And what can we do about it? What can you and I do to reshape the world and to challenge the structures that support such an unjust system? We feel utterly powerless to effect radical change. And I find it interesting that in this vision it is nations that stand before the Son of Man and it is nations that are judged because it is often the way that nations operate that cause the problems with their policies and practices – but what can we as individuals do to change the ways of nations? Democracy may be a cherished gift but it is also fragile and easily abused, and even at its best it is, as Winston Churchill put, the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time...’ What can my single vote do to shift the creaking foundations that the world is built upon? And so it is easy sometimes to do nothing.

There again there is what is called compassion fatigue. Sometimes it feels as if the weight of the world is just too heavy to bear. Another appeal for another famine. Another appeal for another natural disaster afflicting another forsaken nation. Another beggar on the street asking for our spare change. Compassion only goes so far and there comes a point where we just feel numbed. So we do nothing.

So how do we overcome our inertia? Where does motivation come from? Well, I would suggest that our passage from Matthew gives us a clue, something to hold onto. In effect, it says, start small. Jesus says, ‘just as you did it to one of the least of these – just one - you did it to me. And this is so important. Jesus does not, actually, assign to us the task of changing the world – that’s his job. And he has done the heavy lifting in his life and death and resurrection. Our task is to bear witness to his rule that has begun there and that will one day, on this last day pictured in our passage, finally triumph. And we bear witness to that reality by feeding one hungry person, clothing one naked beggar, welcoming one stranger, visiting one prisoner. Start there, where it’s manageable. Some of you may know the story of Oscar Schindler, the German industrialist who saved many Jews from the gas chambers, popularised in the film Schindler’s list.

. Schindler was given a ring secretly made from a worker's gold dental bridge which was engraved with a Jewish quotation, ‘Whoever saves one life saves the world entire.’ Just one life. ‘As you did it to one of the least of these.’ We are not powerless and helpless.

And of course Jesus says not only, ‘as you did it to one of the least of these...’: he says ‘as you did it to one of the least of these you did it to me.’ And here we return to this extraordinary feature of our faith: a faith that is shaped by a crucified Christ is one where we touch God not just in holy places, and we experience God not just in beauty and in sunrise and sunsets and in mountains and in star-scattered skies. These are where we would normally expect to sense God. But not this God, who we meet God in the ugliness of the poor and the wretched and in those on the edge of life. Here we are given a new sacrament, a new touching place with the living God.

The vision of the sheep and the goats has been an inspiration to Christians throughout history as Christians bear witness to a crucified Lord. May that witness be such that we hear Christ say on the last day, 'come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.' Amen.