

Morning Worship for Sunday 22 November

from the United Reformed Church in
Morpeth,
Widdrington and Gt. Bavington.

Opening words

Hymn: 522 From heaven you came, helpless babe

From Heaven You Came, Helpless Babe,
Entered Our World, Your Glory Veiled;
Not To Be Served But To Serve,
And Give Your Life That We Might Live.

*This Is Our God, The Servant King,
He Calls Us Now To Follow Him,
To Bring Our Lives As A Daily Offering
Of Worship To The Servant King.*

There In The Garden Of Tears,
My Heavy Load He Chose To Bear;
His Heart With Sorrow Was Torn,
'Yet Not My Will But Yours,' He Said.

This Is Our God,....

Come, See His Hands And His Feet,
The Scars That Speak Of Sacrifice,
Hands That Flung Stars Into Space
To Cruel Nails Surrendered.

This Is Our God,....

So Let Us Learn How To Serve,
And In Our Lives Enthroned Him;
Each Other's Needs To Prefer,
For It Is Christ We're Serving.

This Is Our God,....

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Opening Prayer

Great and wonderful God
how good to enter your gates
and to gather in your name.

How good to know
that you are the eternal God
and we are your beloved people.

How good to sing in praise of you,
to pray,
and stand in awe of your greatness.

You, Creator of the universe.
You, Author of time.
You, who sustains all life.

We give thanks, Gracious God,
how good it is to be here.
How very good to be here.
AMEN

Karen Campbell

Reading: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

Sermon

So Cam, this reading usually leads people to think about Jesus coming again, and sorting out who is good and who is bad. The good then go to heaven and the bad people go to hell. The passage is one of the main passages that is cited as biblical evidence for a heaven and hell.

So I thought it would be interesting to have a chat about this passage to explore what we think the passage is all about.

Julian: Today is the feast of Christ the King, and it is important that we don't miss the importance of this first verse of the reading. When the Son of Man, that is Jesus, comes in his glory and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. We have the image of Jesus as King. And before the King all nations are gathered, and the King will separate the people one from another. And I think I want to ask you Cam what you think about a time when Christ will come again, and also about the judgement that he brings.

Cam: Yes, thank you Julian. I think for me, there are some Christians who think we will go up to heaven and reach the gates, and God will either let you in because you have done good things in your life, or you will go to this place called 'hell' because you have done bad things. For me, I disagree. Personally, I don't think hell is this physical place that we are going to. I personally believe that hell is part of this idea that we get to see the eternal life, we can see this promised life that we are promised, we can see heaven, it's in our grasp, but we are not allowed to go in. And we can see everyone enjoying eternal life, and hell is in our own mind, we create it ourselves and it will be different for everyone. Julian, you might have your own idea of hell, and my idea of hell, and it's not as simple as black and white, it's a grey area almost. It's your own mind.

Julian: And certainly the problem with picking out one passage from the Bible and saying this is a blueprint for what Jesus means is problematic. Because we have to take the whole of what Jesus says into account, and our black and white ideas just don't fit.

Nicaragua has been in the news this week because of Hurricane Iota that made landfall there earlier this week. Nicaragua is the poorest country in Central America and the high rate of poverty, including political instability, natural disasters and lack of education. When members of the church in Nicaragua were asked about this parable they see this as not a passage about a future heaven and hell, but of a revolution within that society.

They say that "the Son of Man will not come as an individual, he will be a collective Christ, he will come as a society" They say the people will be King, and Christ will be a society of the poor - and they will judge. And that fits in with the end of the passage that we are going to come onto, in which the people say to the King, "when did we see you hungry?" And the King says "Whatever you did to the least of these, you did for me".

You might think that seems a bit strange, but we are used to thinking of the church today as the body of Christ. We are the body of Christ alive in the world today with Christ as our head, as the Apostle Paul illustrates. So for them they see this Son of Man being the poor of the society and it will be for them to judge who is good and who is evil.

What do you make of this idea of a collective Christ rather than an individual Christ who is going to come back in the future?

Cam: I agree to an extent that it will be a societal think, it may be an idea, and as a society and as a world we communicate and say no that's not right, whatever is going on in the world at the time we say "This is not Ok. This is not good." I think God has given this inspiration in our hearts and minds, and we know roughly what God expects of us and expects of the world, and it's up to us to be the hand and feet here on earth to make that happen. So if we know we are killing off the planet with all our emissions, then maybe that's something we can change because we are the ones doing it. So that's an example of something that's right or wrong, and God gives us the inspiration to change that, but it is up to us to make that happen.

Julian: I think this passage does focus on the poor and our attitudes to all that's wrong with the world and what we can do to change that.

In olden times, before the days of lawyers and solicitors and courts, part of the role of the king, was to make judgements for the people. People would come to the king to air their complaints with the neighbours and the king would make judgements in order to establish fairness. Not to punish, but to rebalance any inequality and to rule with fairness.

The judgement that is talked of in this parable, is more about establishing justice for those who have been unfairly treated, and establishing a more fair and just society. Raising up of the poor and oppressed and making them equal rather than punishing those that have done wrong.

What the people look forward to in the times of Jesus was that Last Judgement. A once and for all judgement, after which no other judgements would be necessary. A final say by the king, which would establish fairness and justice for all, and for all time.

So going back to the Christians in Nicaragua, they see this judgement not as something that God will enforce and punish those who are evil, but one that will naturally happen when the poor are raised up in this way.

They say "Whenever a people become free. The evil ones leave and the ones that want to work for others and build a new society, they stay there."

So this Last Judgement will sort the sheep from the goats, but not an arbitrary sorting by a God who is keen to dole out punishment, but a sorting out caused by those who want no part of this Kingdom that has been established and will continue for ever.

Cam: Lets say you had a rich businessman and poor homeless person and you put in the same room and in the same situation, and you put someone in the room who asks for spare change to catch the bus or something like that, and there are experiments that set about to prove this, the rich businessman who can afford to do something, doesn't want to know, doesn't want to help. It is the poor who are more likely to want to help out in those situations. And I really love this idea that it is the poor that are the most willing to help. And that is such an important message. And as for an eternal 'doom' - I don't know that looks like, I think as humans we can never imagine what that will be like. All I can say is its not heaven, and there is no God there, and I think that's what it may be.

Julian: Its also worth pointing out that those who are blessed in the parable, Jesus says are "Blessed by my Father". But those who are cursed, Jesus says are simply "cursed". And at the end of the parable, its important for us to recognise that God does not send the people away to eternal punishment. It just says "They will go away to eternal punishment". There is a sense here of God blessing, but there is no sense of God punishing people by sending them away to eternal punishment.

There is this idea that heaven and hell are of our own making.

So if we put all our thoughts of hell and judgement to one side, I think the focus of this passage, the reason why Jesus tells it, is that we are accountable to, and for the poor and the hungry and the stranger in our societies. That through our care of these, we care for Christ himself. That Christ the King is concerned with raising up the poor, of establishing justice, and that as Christians, we are the body of Christ, and our work is to establish this kingdom of justice and fairness and equality.

Do you think Cam, that society is becoming more self centred? Do you think people are becoming less willing to do things for other people? Or are there signs of hope that we might recognise?

Cam: I think I see both. As a world we are going very much down this self centred route. Growing up, as children we are told your going to have nice house, and have children, and have a good career and retire. And its all about us, about our position. When you start a new job it your instinct is not that you want to be good at what you do now, but that I want to be

better and I want to get a promotion, and I think its all about ourselves.

But I think there is hope. Churches and youth groups is where I see hope, and I would say that as a youth worker, wouldn't I?. But I think there is a hope in the young people and they want to make a change, and they want to make a difference to how the world is now. I think it is really going to be challenging to make that happen. And its something we have to pray about is how do we be hopeful in this situation.

Julian: Yes, I think that's good. I think no matter what our views are on this passage, whatever we think of heaven or hell, one thing we can agree on is that there is the needs of the poor in our society and we have a long way to go before our society becomes this perfect kingdom that we talk about in the gospels. But we can't deny we all have a place in bringing this about.

Whenever we disregard the needs of those who hungry, or strangers, or in prison, then we delay this Kingdom being established. Only when we respond to these needs, do we come close to the kingdom being established and this Last Judgement that will establish the kingdom for ever.

Hymn: King of Kings, Majesty

King of kings, majesty,
God of Heaven living in me,
gentle Saviour, closest friend,
strong deliverer, beginning and end,
all within me falls at your throne.

Your majesty, I can but bow,
I lay my all before you now.
In royal robes I don't deserve
I live to serve your majesty.

Earth and Heaven worship you,
love eternal, faithful and true,
who bought the nations, ransomed souls,
brought this sinner near to your throne;
all within me cries out in praise.

Your majesty, I can but bow,
I lay my all before you now.
Your royal robes I don't deserve
I live to serve your majesty.

Jarrod Cooper

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We heard earlier the thoughts of people from Nicaragua on our reading today, and we remember that many of these people are now homeless, and hungry, and as a result of the hurricane are now in increased poverty.

We remember too, that an unprecedented 79.5 million people around the world have been forced from their homes. Because of violence and conflict; natural disasters; or extreme weather events. Twenty-six million of these displaced people are refugees: people who have had to travel to a new country to find safety. Worldwide, over half of refugees are under the age of 18.

In the last 12 months, 32000 asylum applications have been made in the UK, ½ of those receive asylum status on the first hearing, many wait for more than 6 months, sometimes years, before decisions can be made.

It is people such as these that are highlighted in our parable. Those who are hungry and thirsty. The stranger. Those in prison. We are challenged through this parable, that until justice is established for these people, the Kingdom will not come, and how we respond to these needs echoes how we respond to Christ himself.

Refuge video

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God,
we are your church, and we pray for all those involved in ministry,
those who are lay or ordained,
those involved on Sundays and through the week,
may they give glory to you and further the work of your kingdom.

Silence

We are your people: **the sheep of your pasture.**

Loving God, may we actively seek to do good,
to stand up against injustice and work for peace;
Lord, rid this world of terrible evils
and give us courage to act as true citizens of heaven.

Silence

We are your people: **the sheep of your pasture.**

Loving God, may the ways we manage our homes,
decisions, time and money,
be in keeping with our calling
as inheritors of your kingdom.
May all that we do be undergirded by love for you

and for one another.

Silence

We are your people: **the sheep of your pasture.**

Loving God, search for those who are lost,
bring back those who have strayed
bind up the injured
strengthen the weak
and help us to share in this work of loving care.

Silence

We are your people: **the sheep of your pasture.**

Loving God, welcome into your kingdom
all whose lives show them to be your servants
though they may not know you by name.
Prepare us all to meet you with the confidence
of those who have received your grace and
forgiveness.

Silence

We are your people: **the sheep of your pasture.**

Loving God
you have shown us
such love and humility;
we offer you our thanks and praise,
in the name of Jesus Christ,
who taught us to say together:

Lord's Prayer

Hymn: 626 Judge Eternal throned in splendour

Judge eternal, throned in splendour,
Lord of lords and King of kings,
with thy living fire of judgment
purge this land of bitter things;
over all its wide dominion
with the healing of thy wings.

Still the weary folk are pining
for the hour that brings release,
and the city's crowded clangour
cries aloud for sin to cease;
and the homesteads and the woodlands
plead in silence for their peace.

Crown, O God, thine own endeavour;
cleave our darkness with thy sword;
feed the faithless and the hungry
with the richness of thy word;
cleanse the body of this nation
through the glory of the Lord.

H. Scott Holland

Blessing