

Year A

Matthew 25:31-46

Just before the death of actor W.C. Fields, a friend visited Fields' hospital room and was surprised to find him thumbing through a Bible. After asking what he was doing with a Bible, Fields replied, "I'm looking for loopholes."

How do you feel having just heard the Gospel reading today? Has it diminished your certainty about your future beyond the grave? Has it caused you any concern whatsoever? I would be very surprised if you are not unsettled today. The reading from Matthew's Gospel contains the only non-contestable reference in the Gospel to the final judgement. There are other times,

especially in parables, when Jesus referred to judgment, even punishment by fire, but we must not be hasty in assuming that these referred to a final judgement. But clearly here, ultimate judgement is in view. But we do face challenges in trying to understand this. Who was Jesus referring to when he spoke of 'all the nations' being gathered before him? Was he referring to the entire world as we might naturally read from our perspective or was there a more particular group of people in mind. You see, in Matthew's Gospel the word translated 'nations' is only ever used to refer to Gentiles. 'The little ones' that Jesus referred to in this passage is an expression used in the

Gospel to refer to his followers. These 'little ones' are clearly separate from the 'nations'. So a good case could be made that this passage depicts the judgement of the Gentiles, understood here as non-Jews and non-Christians because Matthew would have understood the Church as the new Israel. The criteria for declaring the Gentiles righteous or not is whether they have dealt mercifully with Jesus disciples, ordinary Christians. This is a credible interpretation although there is some uncertainty as to its accuracy. The alternative is to read 'all the nations' as referring to all peoples and the 'little ones' to anyone who is in need. The problem with this view is that it

implies that all will be judged on works in this life and not on the grace of God. That's a difficult conundrum to deal with especially for many Protestants who are very protective of their doctrine of justification by faith alone. Of course, the option which you settle on will determine the scope and application of the passage and I cannot do any more than make you aware of these two broad options: you must decide which is more likely.

What is clear however is that Jesus cared passionately about how we treat one another.

Catherine Booth was the "mother" of the Salvation Army. "Wherever Catherine Booth went," said Campbell Morgan, "humanity went

to hear her. Princes and peeresses merged with paupers and prostitutes."

One night, Morgan shared in a meeting with Mrs. Booth; and a great crowd of poor people were there. Her message brought many to believe in Jesus Christ. After the meeting, Morgan and Mrs. Booth went to be entertained at a fine home; and the lady of the manor said, "My dear Mrs. Booth, that meeting was dreadful"

"What do you mean, dearie?" asked Mrs. Booth.

"Oh, when you were speaking, I was looking at those people opposite me. Their faces were so terrible, many of them. I don't think I shall sleep tonight!"

"Why, dearie, don't you know them?" Mrs. Booth asked; and the hostess replied, "Certainly not!"

"Well, that is interesting," Mrs. Booth said. "I did not bring them with me from London; they are your neighbours!"

Beware of anyone who suggests that we should be very careful who our neighbours are. My mother and father retired in 1999 and they decided to sell their home in Glasgow and move to the south of Scotland to be near my sister. They put their house on the market and immediately there was a queue of people on the first evening to view the property. A number of the interested people were from the Pakistani community in Glasgow. The next day

when my father was going out to the car his next door neighbour called him over. She said; “Mr McKee, I do hope you’re not considering selling your property to Pakistanis?” My father walked away.

We cannot choose our neighbours and Jesus knew that. So the measure of a person’s heart is how they treat their neighbour, who may very well be the outcast and stranger. That’s the challenge of the sheep and goats.

Too often, this passage has been used by some Christians as a stick to beat other Christians with. There are some, you see, who consider themselves to be the sheep and they see some goats who are wandering about in their pasture

and their desire is to confront the goats with the judgement of Christ. Unfortunately, I have heard this passage being used to justify the exclusion of some Christians from the 'real' Church. That is an abuse of this text and it should not be tolerated.

F.B. Meyer once said that when we see a brother or sister in sin, there are two things we do not know. First, we do not know how hard he or she tried not to sin. And second, we do not know the power of the forces that assailed him or her. We also do not know what we would have done in the same circumstances.¹ This passage confronts any Christian tendency to become

¹ Brown, Stephen Christianity Today, April 5, 1993, p. 17.

antagonistic to others and any Christian tendency to cool our love for others. It reveals the secret of the kingdom of God that to love is to live. We are judged only on how well we get on with loving others. That's the judgment of Christ the King. He reigns over all and he has a claim over every aspect of our lives.

Pope Pius XI instituted this Sunday as the Feast of Christ the King in 1925. It is now established in the lectionaries of most of the Western church. At its inception Pius XI made the following comment: "If to Christ our Lord is given all power in heaven and on earth; if all men, purchased by his precious blood, are by a new right subjected to his dominion; if this

power embraces all men, it must be clear that not one of our faculties is exempt from his empire. He must reign in our minds, which should assent with perfect submission and firm belief to revealed truths and to the doctrines of Christ. He must reign in our wills, which should obey the laws and precepts of God. He must reign in our hearts, which should spurn natural desires and love God above all things, and cleave to him alone. He must reign in our bodies and in our members, which should serve as instruments for the interior sanctification of our souls, or to use the words of the Apostle Paul, as instruments of justice unto God.”²

² http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_11121925_quas-primas.html

Christ the King is passionate about justice. He is the King who judges. May our lives reflect his concerns and priorities as this Church year comes to an end and we listen once again to the heralds of Advent. Amen.