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“When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels are with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be assembled in front of him, and he will separate them from each other as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”

And welcome to the last Sunday of the Christian Year.

Yes, next Sunday weTMll all be wishing a “Happy AdventTM” to one another as the ecclesiastical calendar kicks in for a fresh term but this Sunday is the last Sunday of the old year “a Sunday traditionally celebrated as the feast of “Christ the King”, and so it seems appropriate that we have as our Gospel reading today a passage that depicts Christ as king, and doing what kings do “passing judgement on his subjects!

I say that this is “traditionallyTM” the feast of “Christ the KingTM” as if this has been the case since time immemorial, but in fact it is a tradition that goes back less than 100 “ to Pope Pius IX.

Pius proclaimed this feast day in 1925, during that volatile period between the two World Wars “ where we were all still counting the cost of the Great War, but where Adolf Hitler was coming to power in Germany and threatening to plunge planet earth back into global violence. Yet, at that stage, everything still hung in the balance. War may not have been inevitable, but the forces that would determine the future of world history didnTMt seem to have any immediate connection to the teachings of the church, and so it was at that point that Pius saw fit to proclaim that it was Christ who would ultimately judge the world, regardless of what the worldTMs political powers might do.

The parallels of that period with our own time seem almost uncanny to me!

I was watching a video this week that Father Elias urged me to look at. It was one ITMd seen some time ago “ an interview with former American General Wesley Clark where he talks about a confidential government plan he became aware of back in 2001 “ a plan to take out seven countries in five years! And I wonTMt bother listing all seven countries for you, but suffice it to say that with Libya now gone only Syria and Iran are left on the list!

And the prospect of war with Iran looms as something that could thrust our world into a period of darkness such as we have not seen in human history up to this point. And whether this happens or not, we appear to be in the grip of forces over which we have no control. And so it seems appropriate once again to proclaim that it is ChristTMs judgement on our world that is going to be the one that is ultimately going to count!

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels are with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be assembled in front of him, and he will separate them from each other as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.”

I notice something very startling right away about ChristTMs judgement of the world “ namely that itTM made on a national basis!

And I mean this in two senses:

Firstly, I mean that Christ is not doing what we do. HeTMs not damning all Iranians to hell!

Have you ever noticed how before we go to war with a country we have to go through a process of dehumanising their inhabitants?

It seems that as human beings we are not good at killing people we think of as family men and women like ourselves, so we give them names – call them spiiks or spooks or gooks or geeks or something similar. And along with the name-calling comes a sense of distance and suspicion as we come to think of these people as being agents of an axis of evil.

It wasn't that long ago that you'd meet someone and say, "and where abouts do you come from brother?" and he'd say "Afghanistan" and you'd say, "Yeah, what's the weather like there?"

Now as soon as you hear the word "Afghanistan" you take one step back and say "Oh" and you find yourself putting your hands in your pockets, just keeping one hand on your wallet. Can these people really be trusted?

As I say, when we see Christ pass judgement here in Matthew 25 it is not on a national or political or ethnic basis. It is not on the basis of colour. It is not a judgement between sheep and horses – between white-coloured and brown-coloured creatures – but between characters who, at a distance, all appear pretty much the same.

And this is different from what we do as we pass judgement on entire peoples and nations, and, even more significantly (from a Biblical point of view) it is different from what Jesus' hearers would have done, for these were people who saw God's judgement of the world as something that would take place totally along ethnic lines!

As far as Jesus' hearers are concerned, and as far as the whole Bible is concerned up to this point, it is the people of Israel who are the people of God, and so the judgement that the people of God are waiting for is one that will judge in favour of Israel over the rest of the world!

From a Biblical point of view this depiction of the judgement of the world, where all the nations seems to be being judged on an equal footing, is simply astounding – so much so that many scholars suggest that we probably would do best to interpret this image of judgement as being a judgement of the non-Jewish nations only!

We all know that it is the people of Israel who are the people of God in the Bible, and so it would just be too outrageous for Jesus to depict the judgment of the world in such a way that Jews and non-Jews were all being judged on an equal basis!

And so such scholars would suggest that when the passage begins by saying that "all the nations" are assembled before Christ, it means "all the non-Jewish nations" only – the understanding being there is a secondary process of judgement for the people of Israel (a process that for some reason doesn't end up getting a mention)!

And personally I think that is a crazy way to read the text, and yet I am sympathetic with those who wish to avoid the obvious meaning of the passage because it is so radical! For what we are looking at here in Matthew 25 is a depiction of Christ's judgement of the world, where not only does ethnicity and nationhood seem to be irrelevant to the process, but religion seems to be irrelevant too!

This is too much, isn't it? I mean, we probably accept that we can't really consign all Iranians to Hell on the basis of their ethnicity, but surely we can on the basis of their religion, can we?

Isn't that the way it's supposed to work? Isn't that what we were taught when we entered the church that all Christians go to Heaven and everybody else – Muslims and Hindus and Jews and most especially Atheists all go to "the other place"?

And yet here Jesus himself gives us a depiction of the final judgement – the only depiction of the final judgement that He ever gives us in fact – where all the nations, all the peoples, all the races and

religions and creeds and kinds of people are there – and yet neither race nor religion (at least, as traditionally conceived) seem to figure as determining factors in the judgment!

Of course, to Jesus’s hearers, to say that race doesn’t matter and that religion doesn’t matter are ways of saying the same thing!

To be a Jew is to be a member of the people of God, and if being a Jew doesn’t earn you any special favours on the day of judgement then being an Episcopalian certainly isn’t going to work (nor being a Catholic nor a Baptist nor a Christian of any brand)!

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels are with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be assembled in front of him, and he will separate them from each other as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

He will put the sheep on his right but the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, “Come, you who have been blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was sick, and you took care of me. I was in prison, and you visited me.”

What follows from here is a scene of great confusion. The nations are divided up on an individual basis, or so it seems, and neither the sheep nor the goats understand why they have been given their particular designations!

I guess we might have anticipated that from the goats! They never understood God or Christ, though from their dialogue they evidently thought they had been doing the right thing. The real surprise, at any rate, is the sheep! These are people who evidently have God’s own heart and exhibit this in lives of compassion, and yet they don’t seem to be able to understand what’s going on either, and if they can’t work it out, what hope have any of us got?!

This is the other great slap in the face that I get from this passage (as if I hadn’t received enough slaps already).

We think we understand people. We think we are able to neatly pigeon-hole them and categorise them as the good, the bad and the ugly, but we can’t!

We just don’t know people well enough to pass any sort of judgement on them. We struggle enough to understand ourselves!

We are like those farm-hands in the story that Jesus told in Matthew 13 where they notice the weeds growing alongside the wheat, so they ask their master whether they can rip out the weeds for the sake of the crop. But what does the master say? “No! Leave the wheat and the weeds alone because you can’t tell the difference!” (vs.29).

It’s remarkable, when you think about the series of parables that we’ve been looking at in the Gospel of Matthew this year, this issue of confusion keeps hitting you in the chin like a repeater-jab from the champ!

The labourers who worked all day in the field could not understand the basis upon which their pay was being worked out!

In the story of the great feast there was an enormous mix-up with the guest list and where one guy ended up being thrown out for reasons he just couldn’t comprehend!

We had ten young girls left banging on the door of the bridegroom’s house, not understanding why they weren’t being allowed in.

We had a servant who buried his master's money, and it did not seem to occur to him that he'd done the wrong thing until it was all too late.

In each of these stories, the principal players keep getting it all wrong. They misunderstand the master. They don't grasp the way he operates. They do the wrong thing, without realizing it, and they keep ending up on the master's wrong side!

The Kingdom of Heaven is like that, so it seems. People keep getting Jesus wrong " the sheep as well as the goats, so it seems!

There is much in this passage that is confusing. We do not understand Jesus, and we do not understand ourselves. And most significantly of all, we do not understand ourselves the way Jesus understands us!

There is much that is confusing in this passage. At the same time, there is certainly one thing in this passage that is abundantly clear, and it is this: that if we want to love Jesus, all we need to do is to show compassion " to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, clothe the naked, stand with the persecuted, visit the sick, join hands with our sisters and brothers in prison, show respect to those who have been violated and abused, and love those who need to be loved.

We live in volatile times. The prospect of a war with Iran chills me to the core " the violence, the bloodshed, and the process of the dehumanisation of Persian and Arab and Muslim people that would inevitably become a part of the dominant culture of this country " all of this chills me and nauseates me. And yet I believe (and want to proclaim today) that Christ is King " that the future lies with Him and that it is His judgement that is ultimately the one that is going to count!

He brings down the high and mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. He fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich empty away. He will bring final peace and justice to this world. And in the meantime, whatever it is that we do for the least of His brethren, we do to Him!

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