

**Isaiah 61** <sup>1</sup> *The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,*<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion –*

*to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.*

*They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendour.*<sup>4</sup> *They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations*

**Matthew 25** <sup>31</sup> *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. <sup>32</sup> All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. <sup>33</sup> He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.*

<sup>34</sup> *“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. <sup>35</sup> 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 invited me in, <sup>36</sup> I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’*

<sup>37</sup> *“Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’*

<sup>40</sup> *“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’*

<sup>41</sup> *“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. <sup>42</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’*

<sup>44</sup> *“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’*

<sup>45</sup> *“He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’*

<sup>46</sup> *“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”*

In a very uncertain world, where so often national leaders behave erratically, or irresponsibly or without integrity, we rejoice to know and to worship Jesus as the King of Kings, full of majesty and grace and who has promised that one day he will return to establish his kingdom of peace, justice and salvation here on earth.

*Democrat supporters, politicians and leaders are at present rejoicing that their leader Joe Biden has been elected president and will come into power on Wednesday, 20<sup>th</sup> January. Meanwhile, they need to get ready for that day so that they can begin to implement all the plans in their manifesto.*

If we are to get ready for that day when Jesus comes into power, then we need to know what is required of us here and now and whilst our first reading reminds us about Jesus's manifesto, our 2<sup>nd</sup> passage tells us Jesus expects of us as we prepare for him coming into power. When Jesus began his earthly ministry with his message *the Kingdom is here*, He famously read the passage from Isaiah 61 that Alan has just read to us and then told everyone in the synagogue *‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.’*

Now in this parable, as part of the last public teaching He gave, Jesus makes it clear that he expects his followers to behave in the same way

*In Middle East it is v, hard to tell difference between sheep & goats - sheep are not the fluffy white things we see around here – outwardly they look the same. During the day often herded together. However they are two quite different species.*

Both groups of people in this story claim to be followers of Jesus, both call the King, "Lord". Both would say that they are God-fearing people, regular worshippers, attenders of their local church.

Outwardly they looked the same - but their hearts were totally different. And this is the basis on which they are judged.

One reason that this passage troubles us is that the gospels and the NT constantly tell us that it is by grace that we are saved, by God's forgiveness freely given which we receive by faith.

And yet this passage seems to be saying we shall be judged according to what we do or fail to do.

How do we make sense of this?

It's not only the goats, but the sheep also are surprised by King's judgement:

Sheep: v.37 *When did we...help you – do anything deserving of your praise?* Hadn't occurred to them that in expressing their love towards the needy, they were expressing their love towards Christ. There was no question of them trying to earn Brownie points to earn their way into heaven. Just their genuine response to Christ's love for them.

**Goats:** v.44 *When did we not.....* They claimed to love Christ but they had separated their faith from the rest of their lives

It's only if we can learn to see Jesus, present in every single person we meet, that the way we treat others will be transformed. We need to learn that each encounter is an opportunity for us to express our love not just *for* Jesus but *to* Jesus.

Jesus' previous two parables about the bridesmaids and the talents, the bags of gold, had focussed on the master going away, and this parable also implies that Jesus is somehow "away", for it talks about him coming back in glory. And yet at the same time this parable tells us that Jesus is still here in our midst – in those individuals in need that we encounter day by day. <sup>35</sup> *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 invited me in, was sick and you looked after me, etc.* Jesus is right there in the neighbour or stranger that we help.

*Mother Theresa spoke about how much she learnt once from a young nun who had spent all morning tending, washing and nursing the worn-out bodies of women taken off the streets of Calcutta. She was commenting on the enormous privilege for a priest to touch the body & blood of Christ in the bread & wine. The nun said "But I have been touching the body of Christ for the last 3 hours."*

So in today's gospel Jesus is saying that if truly love Jesus then of course we will want to show compassion to our fellow followers of Christ for they are J's brothers and sisters. It is by grace that we are saved, but how can we claim to know anything of that grace if we are not willing to show something of that grace to our brothers and sisters in Christ who are in need?

Does this mean that we are only called to care for those who are our brothers and sisters in Christ? Hardly! This is just a starting point a bare minimum. Quite apart from anything else, this passage shows that everyone we meet is potentially a brother or sister in Christ anyway. *The Bible Course – Finny drug dealer in and out of prison, an addict himself. A violent man who got into a fight resulting in him nearly being charged for attempted murder, and actually being sent back to prison for aggravated burglary and threatening to kill. How would you react meeting someone like that?... And yet in prison, he started to read the Bible and is now a changed man, a committed follower of Jesus – Jesus' brother and therefore mine as well.*

*Nottingham Knockers – people often complain, and I'm certainly not sure about the organisation which gets these young men to sell tat at ridiculous prices. But I have to remind myself that the actual person on my doorstep is someone loved by Jesus. I need to treat him with respect and understanding. Maybe that man is Jesus coming to my door...*

The question is, will my actions – my attitude - draw them towards the love of Christ or turn them away? If we ignore their needs, it reveals that my claim to love Jesus is not genuine, and that my profession of faith is entirely false.

Jesus says that if we love him, we will keep his commandments. And the 2<sup>nd</sup> great commandment, after *loving the Lord our God with all of our heart*, is *to love our neighbour as ourselves*. Jesus offered compassion, grace, forgiveness, blessing to all who came to him. He did not question or examine them before deciding whether they were believers or "deserved" to be healed, he just did it. I doubt he even expected the majority of them to come to faith: think of those occasions that he healed all who came to him and yet how few disciples remained faithful to him to the end. As with the 10

lepers, *only one came to faith, the other 9 grabbed the blessing and promptly disappeared.* With his deep understanding of human nature, Jesus must have known that this would have been the case, but this did not stop him healing and helping all who came to him. For this is how he proclaimed the Kingdom of God – not just with his words but by his attitude and by his action. As his followers, we are called to do exactly the same.

Note what Jesus says to the sheep, those that help the needy: *'Come, you who **are** blessed by my Father; not **will be** blessed but you **are** blessed - here and now - in blessing others.*

And note again Jesus does not refer to the blessing that the sheep receive, as a **reward** for good behaviour, but as their **inheritance**:

*"take your **inheritance**, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.*

In other words, when we respond to others with the compassion of Christ, we reveal who we truly are: those who have grasped the love of Christ by faith and are truly his brothers and sisters, children of our heavenly Father

Let's pray

*Lord Jesus give us grace that our eyes might be opened to see you in everyone that we meet and love them as we claim to love you – our loving, compassionate Saviour and King.*