

22 November 2020

Matthew 25:31-46

I once met Lord Longford (1905-2001). As I recall it was at a picnic, summer 1994. He had invited my son's school to use the grounds of his home for a family picnic. I can't admit to an in depth conversation about his passion for penal reform. He was in a wheelchair and I chatted to him about his garden. A former labour cabinet minister Lord Longford regularly visited different inmates in prison. Apparently when he was close to death he asked his wife "what was the most important quotation from the bible?" He answered his own question saying "I was in prison and you came to visit me".(Matt25:36). Those were his last words.

This quote comes from our gospel reading commonly referred to as "the sheep and the goats". It isn't a parable as such more of a narrative. There is a lot of divided opinion as to its meaning. It opens up the whole debate of how we are saved? This reading can give the impression that the only thing that counts is being kind and caring to those in need. Are we saved by our good works or are we saved by God's grace? I'm sorry if you are hoping I can give you a clear explanation. I can't. I think this is one of those occasions where we have to accept there is a lot of mystery in our faith, a lot we can't understand. One thing I am pretty clear about is that we are saved by grace for good works - the good works come as a result of knowing our salvation is secure.

In this narrative Jesus describes himself as King (very appropriate as today is Christ the King Sunday) and shepherd. The King who sits on his glorious throne and apportions justice and the shepherd who nurtures and cares for his creatures. The Lord of all creation whilst at the same time deeply concerned about our individual lives. I find myself pondering on the fact that, in this passage, Jesus judges the group for how they treat the individual. I find myself thinking of the injustice of certain cultural systems? Too big a subject for today!

The people Jesus is speaking to are surprised, they didn't know they had fed, clothed and visited Jesus. He tells them ..."whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." "The least" who are they? I wonder did Lord Longford see Jesus in the faces of all prisoners he went to visit?

Certainly Mother Teresa had a clear idea of who " the least" were, as she and her sisters worked tirelessly amongst the poor in Calcutta. She said "the dying, the unwanted, the unloved - they are Jesus in disguise".

It's often said that we are to be God's hands and feet. Although God is supreme in every way, He has set things up for us to help Him. It's been the pattern from the beginning going back to when God gave Adam the task of naming all the plants and animals and to care for them.(Gen 2:20). Serving God and helping to extend His kingdom is what we are called to do. Giving and receiving are somehow part of the cycle of self giving love that mirrors the heart of the universe. The trinity Father, Son and Holy Spirit invite us to join their dance of intimacy, the flow of love given and love received.

In order to give more it helps if we can recognise all that we have been blessed with. All the gifts, abilities, attributes of our personality. Jesus is asking of us to love. You will often hear Terry mention two phrases which have been very significant to him on his spiritual journey. One is from The Shack "Learning to live loved" and the other from Les Miserables "To love another person is to see the face of God ." I think they fit rather well here. It's only when we know how loved and precious we are that love will naturally flow out of us into the lives of others.

Maybe this is why the people were surprised when Jesus praised them for their service. They didn't think they were doing anything special. Helping and caring just seemed the natural thing to do. I wish it always came naturally to me. I'm often so preoccupied with my own concerns that I probably don't even recognise another's need.

It occurs to me we could see this reading as a spiritual check up, a diagnostic tool, in the same way we go to the Doctors to have a health check up. When we give to others who can't give back, does it flow naturally from us out of love or do we have a different motivation? To get brownie points, to hope our actions will make us look righteous.

Perhaps the more we can be grounded in humility and recognise our dependence on the mercy of God, maybe only then, we will be able to give out of the overflow of love that Jesus died on the cross to make available to us.