

Christ the King
Matthew 25, 31-46

Today is the last Sunday of the Christian Calendar, the end of the Christian year. Next Sunday is the First Sunday in Advent, the beginning of the Christian Year. We start the year with Advent, the season of preparation for the birth of the Christ Child. After Christmas the year then stretches out ahead of us. We move from Advent to Christmas then to Epiphany when we remember the arrival of the Kings and then, after a short gap, on towards the next season of preparation of Lent as we prepare for Easter with the death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour. The Christian year moves on, it goes round its cycle ending with this Sunday when the common lectionary ends with this Sunday's theme, 'Christ the King'

In a few weeks, at the end of December, we will also end the calendar year of 2011 and celebrate the start of 2012. It is often traditional at that time to reflect on where we are in our lives, what we have achieved and what we have not achieved and what will our plans be for the year ahead. Perhaps we should carry out a similar exercise this morning as we end the Christian Year. Perhaps we can all reflect on our successes and our failures a church. The ways we have responded to God's call and the ways we have failed to respond. Of course, we remind ourselves that when we talk of the successes and failures of the church, we are really talking about our successes and our failures, we are the church.

Success and failure is key to the reading we listened to this morning from Matthew. The reading reminds us that when Jesus returns in all his glory he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory with all the angels around him.

He will arrive amongst us as King; but not as a gentle meek and mild King, the sort of King that Christmas reminds us of. The description that Matthew gives us is of a King of Judgement. King Jesus will separate the sheep from the goats. He will separate those who have followed him and carried out his will and those who chose not to.

At the time of writing, this was revolutionary for the Jews as they had always assumed that they would be automatically rewarded at the final judgement. They were, after all, God's elect; they had been rejected and oppressed and those who had rejected them and oppressed them would finally pay the price. But Matthew presents a different vision of judgement, although it is every bit as stark and uncompromising as that envisioned in the Old Testament. All people will be judged, and by exactly the same criterion. Judgement belongs to God alone.

It is interesting to ponder that in Matthew's account, the righteous did not know that they had done the right things. They did not seem to realise that they had followed the comment '***As long as you did (or not) do it for one of the least of my brothers, you did (or not do) it for me'*** . So, it demands the question, who are we to suggest who is a sheep and who is a goat?

So, we can ask the question this morning, as a church did we follow that commandment this past year and as individuals, did we also personally follow the demand? '***As long as you did (or not) do it for one of the least of my brothers, you did (or not do) it for me'*** .

A very simple question, but I suspect very difficult to answer.

I would say as a church we have done a great deal this year. So let's think about it?

The Homework Club is now established and doing great work to help children who need assistance with their homework and it provides an excellent tutoring service. In addition, it takes pressure away from families at the weekend. We identified a need and provided a response to it.

We continue to run the Give and Take. Not always a stress-free time, but times where those who have not much can come and help us recycle clothing and household goods that others have finished with. It is amazing to see how pleased families are when they are given the opportunity to get clothing that is good and suitable for their family. Families end up with essential items they cannot afford.

We run the Ladies Bible study to help develop the understanding and faith of those who attend. We answer the need to develop our faith. This is not perfect, as only a few attend and we are looking at a solution for a similar response for the men.

We provide fellowship and worship through our services and coffee times afterwards.

We help develop our young people by the variety of Sunday School and children's clubs we support along with Friedenskirche.

We spent 5 weeks working our way through Bishop Robert Schnase's book looking at the 5 principles of Christian living. Radical hospitality, Passionate worship, Intentional faith development, Risk-taking mission and service and Extravagant generosity. We looked at how we should develop ourselves as Christians and how we can help others.

We do these activities, but I am forced to ask, do we do enough and I must also ask the question: Do we all participate in this work, or is it just there are a few sheep here and the goats sit back and let it all happen around them?

But as I say this, I am reminded that we have to be careful that we do not judge. If we are not careful, we can make presumptions about who will be saved and who will not. Jesus' words challenge every assumption we have about 'us and them'. We assume we know who is 'one of us' and who is not. But Matthew implies that those who do good are not always aware of the good they are doing. They are responding to God's call but still realise that they are far from perfect. Matthew also implies that there could be some surprises and that we must leave the decision to Jesus. We must be very careful that we do not become judgemental. It is for God to judge and for us to do his will.

We know who supports the activities here in Peace Church and who doesn't, or do we? Are we not being really presumptuous that if you are seen here at Give and Take helping, then you must be a sheep, and if you are nowhere to be seen when help is required, then you are definitely a goat?

I remember my father telling me one day that he was going out to visit some house bound pensioners who were members of the church. I asked him what the point was; they didn't do anything for the church any more. He looked at me in the eye and said, yes they are no longer able to help us physically, but they pray for us every day. That is much more important. Yes, I did feel small, but I learned my lesson. It is certainly not for me to judge.

But just in case I begin to feel comfortable again, Jesus will judge. Sheep or Goats?

I mentioned the things we do in Peace Church to respond to Jesus' challenge. But the tasks we do for God are not necessary in Peace Church, they can be in the community. So, I must also ask what do we do in my life to respond to Jesus' challenge? What do we all do?

'As long as you did (not) do it for one of the least of my brothers, you did (not do) it for me'.

Many members of the congregation will be responding to God's challenge in many ways that we have no idea of.

But I ask, during this past year did you feed the hungry? Did you give the thirsty a drink? Did you invite a stranger in? Did you give clothes to someone who needed them? Did you look after the sick? Did you visit the prisoners?

Did we do as Jesus asked? Did we respond to God's call?

Of course, there are many ways to respond and answer Jesus' call. But the core challenge is the way we behave towards 'the least of those who are members of Christ's family' There is always someone worse off than we are.

And, of course, there is the issue that only Jesus knows who is a member of his family; so our responsibility is not to those that we recognise and select, but to all who are in need, all who are hungry or thirsty or homeless or sick or in prison. All who are in need, no matter what creed or colour or nationality.

We have a very different concept of selecting groups of people. If you are like me, you do it all the time.

If I was to ask you all to stand, I could ask those who had blond hair to move into one group, I could then ask all who support FC Bayern Munich to move into another group, then perhaps those who were older than 30 to stand in another, then those who came to Ladies Bible Study, then those who had breakfast before they came.... All different categories of people, and some of these criteria are important to people, Of course some of you fit several of the groups and would have to move around as I asked the questions. It is difficult to separate. I could ask you 'If one side of the church is marked 'perfect' and the other is marked 'perfectly evil' which side would you go to? Where would you stand? And where would you put everyone else?

The differences that divide us aren't as fixed as we sometimes think. Who would be brave enough to divide us all into sheep and goats?

The image we have of Jesus as a King is varied. We sometimes think of him as the King of Love, we read that description in the Psalms. We sing the hymn 'The King of Love my Shepherd is' This gives us a picture of comfort. At other times we see him as a King of judgement as when he cleared the temple. He made his view very clear that day. At times we see him as a King of healing; the times he healed the sick and cast out demons. At other times we see him as a King who set aside his position in heaven to come and live on earth and serve humanity, he washed his disciple's feet. They appear to be different images, but they are images of different aspects of the same king.

During this past year we have looked at various aspects of Jesus through the story of his life. We have read about his birth, life, death and resurrection. We have discussed his parables. We have studied the followers and friends of Jesus. We have seen the different characteristics and have seen him as a man of love as well as a man of anger. We have seen that Jesus has many facets to his character and King Jesus has the same. Just like us Jesus has a complex character.

The vision Matthew gives us this morning is a King of judgement a King separating those who have responded to his call from those who have failed to.

So as we end this year in the Christian calendar and move next week into the New Year, we should plan as individuals and as a church exactly how we intend to respond to Jesus call? So that when Jesus returns in Glory we shall be recognised as sheep and not as goats.

We must continue to ask the questions both as a church and as individuals; how shall we feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, give shelter to the homeless, cloth the naked, visit the prisoners?

How shall we help those around us? How shall we respond to God's calling?

Happy New Year!

Let us pray:

King Jesus,

We stand before you today at the end of the year and ask you again for your blessing on our lives. We thank you for what you have done in our lives over the past year and we pray that as we enter this new year as a community of you, we will open ourselves to your calling and will seek to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, give shelter to the homeless, cloth the naked and visit the prisoners

Amen