

An Upside-Down Kingdom

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on Nov 26th, 2023 - Matthew 25:31-46)

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I have only been to a few rock concerts in my time and three of them have been to see the band Midnight Oil, I know I am showing my age now. That doesn't include the time they performed in the Union Hall at Latrobe, and I was able to listen to them from my college bedroom window, which just happened to be close to the hall. I guess it was their music but also the lyrics in their songs – they sang about the damage mining did, indigenous rights, US forces which seemed to go into many countries and so on. It was their passion for both music and politics that spoke to me. Their lead singer Peter Garrett, who later became a politician, I think said that he thought the test of the kind of society we had was how they treated the least, seems to me that is exactly what Jesus is on about in our reading today.

Today is the Feast of Christ the King.

King, empire, sovereignty, realm and rule are concepts that we in Australia don't really think about, and it would be true to say even snigger a bit about, as we ponder having a King who lives thousands of kilometres from us and has very little to do with us. Although in the last year or so we have watched some of what happens with royalty, following the Queen's death last year and the coronation of King Charles this year.

Our reading today speaks about a kingdom of a very different kind. A kingdom not defined by ruling but by service, this is God's kingdom. In our reading we find two groups – one group clearly does not please the judge, the other group seems to have understood what it is all about. What I find interesting is that neither group seem to be aware of when they were either looking out for the least or when they didn't. Why is this so? Is it that the 'goats' were so removed from the world that they never ever encountered those in need – were they so heavenly minded that they were no earthly good? Did they not expect God to be in the midst of the 'stuff' of the world. What of the sheep? They too seem to be surprised, perhaps they too thought of God as removed from the world, but still lived their lives following the commandment to love God and love neighbour?

The message of the parable is however twofold and quite clear. First, God is encountered in the faces of the least – the poor, the ragged, the scrappy, the ill, the jailbirds. Secondly, living kingdom life means seeking out the hungry, thirsty, sick, naked, imprisoned, stranger and working to meet their needs. This is what it means to live in the reign of Christ. Again, with Jesus, notions of leadership are turned on their head in the light both of his example and his teaching.

So, the reading calls us to ask, I think, who in our midst are hungry, thirsty, sick, naked, imprisoned, or a stranger? Who and where are those who are hungry for food, for love, for acceptance? Who and where are those needing refreshment for their thirst for meaning and for purpose. Who and how will we welcome the strangers (refugee or asylum seeker) in our midst, how will we offer them hospitality? How will we clothe the poor with dignity? How will we care for those who are ill in body, mind or spirit? How will we break down the walls of fear and prejudice that imprison others?

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So, do we engage in such as a method to encounter Jesus? No, we love one another and show spontaneous care and have as our focus the other person's good because that is what it means to love God and neighbour – to act in any other way is to exploit them as a tool to encounter God. Like the sheep, encountering God is a consequence of living a life of love. I have spent the last twenty-six years attempting to live out Matthew 25 and continue to find it a delight and privilege to work with such people and continue to be surprised by the way God has encountered me along the way.

Let us be who we truly are, those who have been invited into the kingdom of Jesus.

Such works of justice and mercy will open us to the experience of God's reign and are true acts of worship. It is here that we find Christ and discover what it means to be a community of faith.

Kingdom life, life with God is to be found in service not in power. Life with God demands that we involve ourselves in acts that give life. Amen.