**20th November 2011**

**Matthew 25:31-46**

 After a day in which we started to train the first volunteers for the new Food bank (more of which I shall speak about in the church meeting) it seems rather apt that our bible passage for today is about feeding the hungry. But it also relates to so many acts of generosity and compassion.

I am always so moved when I discover how people give of themselves in working for others. In our own church through Open Door, Child contact Centre, Family Cafe, youth and children work, visiting people, giving lifts and in the wider community through things like meals on wheels, citizens advice, good neighbours. I could go on. So many of you are a blessing.

One of the hazards of high profile TV charity appeals like Children in Need, is that celebrity high profile events can diminish the everyday caring activities of ordinary people. Someone wrote that celebrity involvement with charities tends to be more about the celebrities than about the charity.

The bible passage for today has Jesus talking about the anonymous acts of love and compassion that people give to others as a criterion of judgement at the last day.

When most people read it they focus on the issue of judgement and wonder if they pass the test!

Like it or not, judgment is a fact of life. That is true whether we are talking about the histories of nations or the events of our own personal life. If we break the law, then society will judge us. If we live immorally--drink too much, engage in sexual promiscuity, live a lifestyle of constant stress--then our bodies will judge us. We simply cannot escape judgment in life.  
  
It is difficult to grasp the idea that judgement can be positive and how, in speaking of it to his hearers, Jesus was proclaiming gospel hope.

The gospel call is to accept God’s loving judgment to support us in the remaking of our lives. This must be a real opening of ourselves to God’s searching light, not the lip service of a prayer prayed. If this sounds punitive, consider an analogy: the purpose of taking antibiotics is to kill the germs that make us ill.

Middle Eastern dictators are finding that their people’s judgment is inescapable. The fat cats amongst the bankers and financiers are finding the spotlight inexorably upon them. Jesus teaches that God’s future judgment cannot be ducked or avoided. But it can be embraced. [The Desert Fathers](http://www.goodnews.ie/wisdomlinegerus.shtml) considered self- justification a much harder burden than being honest.

Even when we are in the wrong, our best interests lie in being judged. We are called to be honest before God: about our thoughts, our actions and our lives, as individuals and as nations.

The parable just read gives a strong jolt to those who are heavy on doctrine but short on ethics, those who stress right beliefs but neglect right actions.   
  
There is a Peanuts comic strip where Snoopy is sitting in the doorway of his dog house shivering violently during a winter storm. You can see that it is near Christmas time by the decorations on the dog house. Charlie Brown and Lucy are walking by - all bundled up and warm as toast. They offer a greeting, "Be of good cheer, Snoopy," Charlie Brown says. "Yes, be of good cheer," Lucy replies. And they keep on walking as Snoopy sits there with chattering teeth.  
  
The message of the cartoon was powerful. The most noxious lifestyle of all is when compassionate words come from a care-less heart. Snoopy would no doubt prefer a blanket over a greeting. A compassionate heart is a reflection of the heart of God.

A shepherd divides the sheep from the goats, said Jesus, so too shall there be a great division on the final day. This account of the last judgement, expounded to a group of people who would have had clear presumptions about who would be saved and who would be damned, challenges every assumption about ‘us and ‘them’. Jesus seems to say that the judgments are way more complicated – in fact the divisions will go down the middle of most of us.

Most Jews believed that at the final judgement they would be rewarded, as God’s elect, and those who had rejected and oppressed them would be condemned. But Matthew’s readers are given a new vision of judgement, although it is every bit as stark and uncompromising. All people will be judged by the same criterion vs32 ‘as long as you did (did not) do it for one of the least of my brothers, you did (did not) do it for me’ (vs40,45).

The phrase ‘the least of my brothers’ has led scholars to ask who was Jesus referring to? Was it everyone who is hungry, thirsty, poor, needy, or otherwise distressed? Was it the Jews? Or was it Jesus disciples – the church? The latter option is the most likely as the phrase is used elsewhere in Matthew’s gospel to explicitly refer to the followers of Jesus (ch.10.42, 12. 46-50). If this is the case, the likely meaning of this scene is that those who have not followed Jesus will be judged in terms of how they have treated the people whom he counts as his family. This teaching was designed to encourage the persecuted and suffering church.

*When Martin of Tours (who lived in the 4th century), a young Roman soldier and seeker of the Christian faith, met an unclothed man begging for alms in the freezing cold, he stopped and cut his coat in two and gave half to the stranger.  That night he dreamt he saw the heavenly court with Jesus robed in a torn cloak.  One of the angels present asked, "Master, why do you wear that battered cloak?"  Jesus replied, "My servant Martin gave it to me." Martin's disciple and biographer Sulpicius Severus states that as a consequence of this vision Martin "flew to be baptized".  God is gracious and merciful; his love compels us to treat others with mercy and kindness. When we do something for one of Christ's little ones, we do it for Christ.*

Children learn by categorising things – shapes, people, words, and so on. As we mature, we begin to recognise the inadequacies of our childish categories, but this process lasts a lifetime. At face value this teaching sees God ultimately categorising the people of the world into the acceptable and the unacceptable. The Sheep and the Goats.

But who are the family of Jesus? We often speak of the family of the church’, but these words identify the hazards associated with this rather cosy image. Jesus family are the hungry, the poor, the sick, the imprisoned. Compare this with the sermon on the Mount, ‘if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?’ (Matt 5.47)

*ICON*

*This stunning icon is by* [*Br. Robert Lentz*](https://www.trinitystores.com/store/artist/Robert-Lentz)*, OFM. One name for this icon is “Christ in the Margins,” echoing the call in Matthew 25 to see Christ in the “least of these.”*

*The icon does not make clear which side of the fence Christ is on. Is he imprisoned or are we? Through our cultural institutions and personal lives we all place barriers between ourselves and true happiness. We and our institutions also try to imprison Christ in various ways, to tame him and*

This text also can lead individuals or congregations to approach those who are in need as objects of good works – “us” helping “them.” It can be a challenge to see how *encounter* is at the heart of the passage. As Jesus’ disciples perform acts of mercy and justice, they encounter the living presence of Christ in one another. In other words, those who have plenty are as much in “need” (of God) as those with little. *the dangerous challenges he would bring us of our goals and ideals.*

In their book ‘Good Goats: healing our image of God’ Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn come to the conclusion that ‘we are all good goats (and by implication ‘we are all bad sheep’). We can all identify times when we have seen people’s needs and tried to help, and also occasions when we have failed to respond lovingly. The fault lines run far more often through us than between us.

*Judgement belongs to God alone: significantly in Matthew’s descriptive account, the righteous did not know that they had done these things. The point is that those who seek worldly praise for their deeds already have their reward. Think of Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount about not letting your right hand know what your left is doing – reward will be heaven. . It is what we do spontaneously, ‘in secret’ for which we will be rewarded*

A Small Act of Kindness

Let me tell you about a man named Floyd. According to the standards of the world Floyd was nobody. Floyd traveled around the country looking for work at harvest time. Floyd had no home and no place to go. A couple invited him into their home and gave him a home-cooked dinner. Floyd said very little as they ate. The wife, Nancy, offered to wash his clothes for him but Floyd declined the offer. He picked cherries in the orchard next to their home that day and slept under the trees that gave him his livelihood.   
  
Early the next morning Floyd returned to the couple who had shown him kindness. While he finished one last project in the orchard, Nancy, on an impulse, wrote him a letter telling of God's love. Then she tucked it with a little cash into a New Testament. She found his backpack in the yard, and stuck the packet inside. She imagined him traveling that day looking for work and at the end of the day bedding down somewhere under the stars, weary and all alone. She was warmed by the thought of Floyd's surprise when he discovered her note, the New Testament and the cash she had planted in his backpack.   
  
This Christian couple never saw Floyd again. Four years later Floyd's sister wrote to them, telling of his death. As Floyd's sister was going through his few belongings she found the New Testament and the letter Nancy wrote telling of God's love. "They must have been very dear to his heart," Floyd's sister concluded, "for he carried them with him until he died."   
  
It was such a simple gesture ” a note, a Bible and a little cash ” but little counts for a lot in the kingdom of God. You never know who the least of these my brothers may be. Life is full of surprises.

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*Alex Haley, the author of Roots tells the story of how his father had his life changed by a simple act of kindness:*

*He was the youngest of eight children, living as a sharecropping family.  Everyone in the family was needed to help with the crops.  After several years of schooling the family pressed each child into service on the farm. Fortunately the boy's mother intervened on behalf of her child and was allowed to stay in school. When he was ready for college he chose the Lane Institute, working as many as four jobs in addition to full-time studies.  It was all physically and emotionally wearing.  
  
He worked for a summer as a porter on a train and happened to meet a man early in the morning who couldn't sleep and wanted to talk.  This man was impressed by a black porter working to earn money for college and tipped him the unimaginable sum of five dollars.  
  
By the end of the summer Mr. Haley had to decide whether to convert his summer earnings into a mule and begin to sharecrop, or to stretch to complete his last year at school.  He took the risk of competing college.    
  
Alex Haley tells us what happened next: "When Dad arrived on campus, the president called him into his office and showed him a letter he had just received.  The letter was from the elderly man whom my father had met on the train, and it contained a check for $518 to cover Dad's tuition and living expenses for one full year." The kindness of an unknown friend made all the difference in the life of Alex Haley's father, Alex Haley himself, and every succeeding generation of that family.  
  
Just an example of what the acts of love and care performed by virtual strangers can mean.*

Finally, consider the following story that is written in the spirit of Matthew 25. (Note: This story is adapted from the Prologue of M. Scott Peck’s [The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace](http://www.amazon.com/Different-Drum-Community-Making-Peace/dp/0684848589/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1320968627&sr=8-1); however, the story’s original author is unknown and there are many similar versions in circulation.) The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times:

Once a great order, as a result of waves of anti-monastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth, all its branch houses were lost and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a hermitage. As the abbot agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to him to visit the hermitage and ask if by some possible chance the hermit could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The hermit welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the hermit could only commiserate with him: “I know how it is,” he exclaimed. “The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in all the nearby towns. So the old abbot and the hermit commiserated together. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. “It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years,” the abbot said, “but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?” “No, I am sorry,” the hermit responded. “I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.”

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, “Well what did the hermit say?” “He couldn’t help,” the abbot answered. “We just commiserated and read the scriptures together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving — it was something cryptic — was that the Messiah is one of us. I don’t know what he meant.”

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered these words and wondered whether there was any possible significance. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that’s the case, which one?

Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant the Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation.

On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light.

Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people’s sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the hermit did mean Brother Elred.

But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.

Of course the hermit didn’t mean me. He couldn’t possibly have meant me. I’m just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn’t be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the hermit’s gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

This story helps demonstrate that the practice of serving Christ through serving the poorest among us (or the practice of affirming the light of God in all people) is a disposition and a set of behaviors that must be cultivated and carried out over time. The day-to-day practice of compassion and of love toward your neighbors (all your neighbors!) is much more important and difficult than simply believing a creed or a set of doctrines.

Sheep or goats? May we serve Christ through serving the poorest among us.