

## *Real Presence and the Hope of Judgement*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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Christ the King / The Reign of Christ—23 November 2014

*Matthew 25.31-46*

It is a privilege for Sonia and me to be with the people of God gathered at St Philip's today, as well as last week and also next week for the first Sunday of Advent. I bring greetings from St Mark's and ask that you would uphold our teaching and training work in your prayers.

In the Church's calendar, today is the last Sunday after Pentecost, when we call to mind the reign of Christ the King. Today also marks the final Sunday of Year A, the year of Matthew. If you cast your minds back to the beginning of the year of Matthew: you might remember that on the first Sunday of Advent, the Gospel reading focused on the judgement associated with the Second Advent of Christ rather than the joy or peace associated with the birth of the Christ-child at his First Advent. And now, at the end of the year of Matthew, our Gospel reading returns to the theme of judgement.

We don't tend to think of judgement as good news, but I have titled my sermon 'Real Presence and the *Hope* of Judgement'. You see, Matthew is both the Gospel of God's 'real presence' in the world and the Gospel that features the threat of divine punishment for human shortcomings.

On one hand, Matthew begins his Gospel with the promise of Emmanuel, God with us (2:23), and he ends his Gospel with that same Emmanuel's promise to remain with his people always (28:20). In between beginning and end, there are other 'real presence' texts. Our Gospel text today is one of them, but one the church has struggled to hear and to heed.

So, on the one hand, Matthew's Gospel presents Jesus as God's presence with us, but on the other hand there are plenty of places in the same Gospel that leave us wondering whether God might actually be against us. Perhaps today's Gospel reading strikes you as one of those. But today it is my responsibility to present this text as a word of life—and hope.

The first thing to notice about this vision of hope is the way in which it begins, with the returning Son of Man enthroned in glory. For Matthew, the returning Son of Man is the self-same Emmanuel who described himself as the Son of Man during his earthly mission. What this means is that Jesus is the lord of history and judge of the nations; what this means is that any ruler from the past, any ruler in the present and any ruler yet to come answers ultimately to Jesus. We might find that a little difficult to imagine, but part of the good news of this passage is that Egypt's pharaohs were not in charge, nor were Rome's caesars in charge, and nor, mercifully, are the present leaders of the world ultimately in charge.

So, not only does the Church's confession of Christ as king provide us with a moral compass, a means of deciding whether or not to fall in line with today's leaders simply because they seem to be in charge, but the same confession of Christ as king carries with it the conviction that God's judgement is part and parcel of the Church's hope. Without divine judgement, there is no hope. Our problem is that we understand God's justice and judgement from our perspective. In popular parlance, both justice and judgement basically boil down to punishment, getting one's comeuppance for doing wrong. But as the good book tells us, God's ways are not ours. We cannot simply take our views of justice and judgement, magnify them umpteen-fold and arrive at a sense of what God's justice and judgement are like. It isn't as straightforward as that.

To complicate things further, as I have already hinted, our Gospel reading is as much apart of the problem as it is part of the solution when it comes to understanding divine judgement. Down through the centuries, the church has looked to Matthew's Gospel, as no other, for its vision of divine judgement, especially final judgement. And Matthew has much to offer on this theme, including our end-time scenario featuring the separation of those judged as goats from those judged to be sheep. But as the church has looked to Matthew for guidance on this matter, it has focused too much on what is said about God's judgement and not enough on the judge who will execute judgement.

The teacher in me cannot resist pointing out the broader context within which our gospel reading occurs. You probably know that Matthew's Gospel features five great blocks of Jesus' teaching, and everyone knows the first of these, the breathtaking Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5 to 7 of the Gospel. Our Gospel reading today comes at the very end of the fifth and final teaching block in Matthew 23 to 25, much of which is also a sermon on the mount—only this time the Mount of Olives across the valley from the temple in Jerusalem. The teacher of these two sermons is the same—God with us in the person of Jesus to change the world for good. As one of Matthew's contemporaries put it, "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday—and today—and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

A question: what makes a sheep a sheep, and what makes a goat a goat? I have been mulling over this question for much of my adult life. One day I'll figure it out, even if it turns out to be the day that Christ the king separates me out from the sheep and puts me with the goats. Even if that happens, that will be all right. You might think there could be no worse fate than to be judged a goat and suffer eternal punishment, but I have come to focus more on the judge than the judgment, more on Christ the king than on 'eternal punishment'. Because Christ the king is my judge, I am hopeful, however I might be judged. I say with Abraham, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen 18:25). And with the Psalmist, "the Lord is good, his loving mercy is forever" (100.4). And I can say that because in Emmanuel, we already know Christ the king. We have seen his face, and we know that the justice of the judge of all the earth is 'Justice plus'—justice plus love, justice plus mercy, justice plus the determination to put things right. The justice of Christ the king, the judge of the nations, is not strict justice according to the letter of the law. It is not legal justice but regal justice, the justice of a king whose heart is set on putting things right.

Matthew generally writes concisely, but in this passage he is ever so repetitive. Matthew wants us to notice where real presence resides. Notice the divine equation: *I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was stranger in your midst, I had nothing, I was sick, I was incarcerated.* Now notice the difference between the sheep and the goats. The sheep had no idea of 'real presence'. They simply noticed human need and responded by sharing and by attending compassionately. They were unaware of real presence, but in meeting human need they brushed up against Emmanuel and were drawn into God's transforming work in the world.

As for the goats, notice what they bleated out when they found out their judgment: When did we see *you* hungry or thirsty or naked or sick or imprisoned and fail to take care of you? The implication is that if they had *known* it was Jesus, they would have done something about it. Had they been aware of the divine equation, real presence in and with the needy of the world, they would have acted with care and compassion.

Matthew's Gospel of real presence hasn't made it easy for any one of us within the Church to be among those judged as sheep. You see, he let the rock wallaby out of the bag. We now know—or at least have no excuse for *not* knowing—the divine equation: that the real presence of 'God with us' is located especially among the needy of the world. For those of us in the wealthy West who are well to do, that is already our judgement.

How, then, is divine judgement the basis of Christian hope? Let's begin with something you all know well. When we pray the prayer that Jesus taught—Our Father in the heavens, how hallowed your name! Your kingdom come, your will be done here as there—when we pray those words, we are praying for judgement. When we pray those words, we are praying for the change that only God can effect in a world habitually antagonistic to God's will and way. And that means that we must be changed, not given yet one more chance to change. We have had plenty of chances to change, but things remain the same. So, we have to be changed and that means being judged and found wanting.

We haven't the vaguest idea of what it will mean to be judged and found wanting in the sight of Jesus. At the very least, it will be our undoing. Since it will be God's undoing of us, however, I am convinced that our undoing will also be our remaking and changing. And my saying that is based on Matthew's conviction that in Jesus we have already witnessed 'God with and for us'. If Jesus is the same, yesterday—and today—and forever, Jesus' manner of addressing greed, injustice, violence, oppression, cruelty, indeed sin of every kind, is already known to us. Punishment there may well be, but punishment as part and parcel of divine judgement must contribute to real change, and punishment for its own sake can hardly do that. Divine judgement has to do with bringing everything into conformity with God's will and way, which is terrifying enough because when that occurs we will be who we are supposed to be, no longer who we want to be. For that reason, God's judgement is our reason for hope.

There is so much more I could say, so many qualifications I should make, so many 'ifs and buts' I should address. But perhaps the time is right for a story that illustrates what I mean about God's judgement as the basis for hope. It comes from *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, one of the Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis. If you have only seen the film version, you have missed the best part of the book, which begins as follows: 'There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it.' As the story progresses, we learn that Eustace is a most disagreeable boy—mean, sniveling, a bully and someone who avoids pulling his weight when there is work to do.

At a certain point in the story, the *Dawn Treader* is shipwrecked on an island, and to avoid exerting himself Eustace sneaks away from everyone else. He witnesses the death of an old dragon, and to avoid a heavy downpour takes refuge in the dragon's cave. Upon waking, he discovers by and by that he has been changed—into a dragon. This effects something of a change in him, for he starts to become more helpful, once he has convinced the crew of the *Dawn Treader* that he is in fact the beastly Eustace become a beast. Finally, he has an encounter with Aslan, who leads him into the mountains where there is a well in the middle of a garden. The dragon that was once Eustace is told it must undress before being able to bathe in the well, and it makes several efforts to discard its dragon skin and scales. Three times he did this, but he remained a dragon. Then Aslan indicates that he will have to undress him. As Eustace tells the story to Edmund Pevensie later, "The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt." Then Aslan grabs Eustace, no longer a dragon, and throws him into the water, which initially smarts but subsequently soothes.

When Eustace rejoins the others, he is described as the 'restored Eustace.' Judgement, for Eustace, involved being undressed and undone, but it also involved being changed into who he was supposed to be. That is the hope of judgement.