November 26, 2017

SERMON: "Lord, When Did We See You?" (*Based on a sermon of Rev. S Fairchild)*

Let us Pray - Creator and maker of us all - bless the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts - grow thou in us and show us your ways and inspire us to live by your truth. Amen

The story is told that some years ago -some time in the 1950s or 60s, an American soldier on a bus in Sweden told the man sitting next to him, 'America is the most democratic country in the world. Ordinary citizens may go to the White House to see the President and discuss things with him.'

"The man said, 'That's nothing. In Sweden, the King and the people travel on the same bus.' "

When the man got off the bus at the next stop, the American was told by other passengers that he had been sitting next to King Gustav Adolf VI.

How many times have you heard the parable of the sheep and the goats?

Once? Twice? A dozen times? I think most of us, at least those of us who have been around the church for a while have heard it several times and are quite familiar with it. The parable is certainly a church favourite, and it is one of the key passages that underlies what modern theologians call "The Social Gospel" and it was foundational to much of the work of the ancient monastic orders and, indeed of the newer ones too - like the "Missionaries of Charity" founded by Mother Theresa. In fact the parable of the sheep and the goats is probably one of the most quoted parables in all of Christendom -right up there with the parable of the Prodigal Son and the Parable of the Talents.

All the nations are gathered before the judge, before the throne of the Son of Man, before the King, and the king separates them

- the right from the left, the sheep from the goats, and he judges them

- and those on the right are saved, and those on the left are condemned.

The judgement is made on the basis of the compassion, the love, or the lack of it that is shown by those who gathered before the throne of judgement.

“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you took me in" the son of man tells those on his right. To those on his left he says the exact opposite. "I was naked" he tells them, "and you did not give me clothing, I was sick and in prison and you did not visit me."

Awesome words these. Words of great clarity. Words with a powerful message for those who have ears to hear it.

Yet, in the end, despite our knowledge of the story and of its message - the message about the vital importance of our acts of sharing and caring, especially with those who are numbered among the least of us - the poor, the hungry, the imprisoned, despite our knowledge of this parable there are elements to it that are not often talked about or if talked about which are glossed over.

I speak of course, about the surprise expressed by the sheep and the goats when they hear the Son of Man say - "I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me drink." or "I was naked and you did not clothe me" and "I was in prison and you did not visit me"

Why is that?

Why are they surprised?

What is it that both the sheep and the goats seem to be missing when they perform their good works - or when they fail to?

I think that they are missing a sense of how the sacred penetrates and is interwoven in the ordinary - indeed in the less than the ordinary - in those places - those persons - that we might consider far from holy - far from being a part of Christ, much less Christ embodied.

Remember the words that Jesus uses.

He doesn't talk about how blessed are we when we visit our friends who are sick, or how wonderful it is when we give good things to our family members and our fellow-believers, or how nice it was when we cloth the folk who are just like us.

No Jesus talks about the least among us - the least within this world,

those whom conventional wisdom might even regard as accursed,

 - the poor of Calcutta,

 - the thirsty in the Sudan,

 - the sick in the wards and on the desert and jungle floors solely reserved for AIDS patients,

Jesus talks and those who are in prison

 - perhaps sex offenders

 - perhaps murderers

 - perhaps only those who have stolen so that their families could eat. We don't know.

But we do know that they are the least amongst us. Those persons whom we might think don't count. Those people whose opinions we might regard as unimportant, or invalid, because of their age - or their sex – or their heritage. Those people whose cries we might ignore because of their race, or beliefs, or their economic position.

And that the Son of Man, that Jesus the Christ, claims to be among them - indeed in them.

And that is surprising is it not - at least to most of us? In fact, it might even be considered outrageous.

Bear with me a minute or two more as I talk about this.

There is no question raised in this parable of what creed either the sheep or the goats had believed; or whether they had sworn allegiance to one whom the bible calls the Son of Man - the Good Shepherd – the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

There is only the surprise that this exalted one - who is - in fact -

Christ Jesus himself - has been present in every person they had ever met, and most especially, in the needy ones and the least important ones - the ones that Jesus calls "the least"

And that judgement is based on whether we treat this king, this son of man, present in these the least, well; or ignore him in his suffering and his want and his need.

That is - to say the least - a bit disconcerting.

We sometimes think that religion is about believing stuff,

and that if we believe the right stuff we are safe.

But it seems not to be so.

Rather our faith seems to be about awareness,

about having our eyes opened to the real world,

and responding compassionately to it.

Whether or not we are "aware" that the Christ is there.

The parable is calling to us, however, to see the Christ there, to see "the Son of Man" in the squalling child who is getting in our way and to hear God in the voice of homeless, substance-addicted person who sleeps in the doorway.

The parable is alerting us to the importance of compassion and to the fact that the Son of Man is present in the needy of our world.

To encounter the least of the brothers and sisters of the Son of Man however we don't need to go to Calcutta, or the Sudan or to one of the overcrowded prisons in our land do we??

Aren't there many who are marginalized, many whom we are regarded of little significance of not being equal to those close to us right here amongst us

- here in Kamloops

- perhaps even here in this church

- or even in our own families?

Remember the first and the greatest commandment - the one about how we are to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind?

Consider what John the Divine, John the Apostle, the disciple of Christ says about that love in his First Letter.

He writes in chapter three, verse seventeen:

 If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in

 need, but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in

 him?

and again in the 4th chapter, at verse 20 and 21

 Anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen,

 cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us

 this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

The sheep - those on the right - have shown love for their brothers and sisters, and in doing so they have shown love to God, and so they enter the kingdom prepared for them.

Their faith is alive - even if they have not grasped the fullness of it. Even if they have not recognized how the Son of Man is everywhere about them. One might say the law has been written on their hearts and guided their actions, if not their thoughts and words.

But think of it. Think of the fullness of it. If our eyes were opened to the depth of the real world and not the shallow world of conventional wisdom, then we would see God present in everyone and everything, especially in the needy and the least important ones.

And that would be even more transforming,

- not only for the sheep, for those who are doing good,

and for those to whom they are showing the compassion of God,

- but also for the goats, for those who may have the right creed and

doctrine but who may have judged the least among us as not being deserving of their love and care, as not being people in whom the holy one dwells.

What a priceless thing if the sheep are not surprised - by the presence of the Son of Man in everyone - and in joy remind those who may risk being judged as goats that all people are wonderfully made and all need to be treated as we would treat the Son of Man.

Provocative, isn't it? It raises a thousand questions in your minds I am sure.

How far should we go in our caring?

Who should we care for - and who, if any, should we not care for?

How can we prioritize our caring so that the truly needy get what they need while those who would suck us dry do not. Or should we worry about that?

I can't answer these questions for you.

It is something that each of us needs to struggle with on a case by case, day by day basis.

But I can tell you that Christ is all around us. That Christ is in the least among us.

In the single welfare mothers

-and in the opioid-addicted persons who are one naloxone injection away from dying from an overdose of fentynal

-and in the prisoners in our jails

-and in the homeless upon our streets or the couch-surfing youth.

Think about this one last time today with me.

Think of it some 2000 years ago when the Son of Man - the one who is King of King and Lord of Lords, wandered as a poor preacher in a poor land, having no home to call his own, much less a throne of righteousness.

Think of when the Son of Man was tried for blasphemy and flogged 39 times as a common criminal and then was hung on a cross to die as one who was accursed.

Think about how the Son of Man came among us - that first time - about the circumstances of his life and his death.

The prophet Isaiah, some 700 years before the birth of Christ puts it this way:

 He had no form or majesty that we should look at him,

 nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was

 despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and

 acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide

 their faces he was despised - and we held him of no account.

Where is Christ to be found today? Where is the Son of Man? He is most certainly here - in this holy place. In you my sisters and brothers. But he is also here in ways we do not so easily grasp.

I understand the surprise of those sheep on the right of the Son of Man - and of the goats on the left. I understand because it is easy to not see him in those who are reckoned to be the least among us. I understand - but I do find it a little sad.

Sad, not because doing good to the least among us has no effect when

we are unaware, clearly it does have an effect,

 It has an effect for those who receive our acts of kindness,

 and it has an effect for us who perform those acts.

But sad because by not being aware, we miss seeing Christ in those around us. And seeing Christ in others is so enriching - so helpful - as we walk the walk that he calls us to walk.

Sad because we miss seeing the sacred in everything, and seeing the sacred is so transforming for us and for our world.

May we all have eyes to see, and ears to hear.