

Sermon on Matthew 25:13-46

John R. Collins

Draft 6 of November 21, 2020

Introduction: This passage speaks of visiting the sick and those in prison. This was vitally important because in ancient prisons food and water were not provided—you had to have someone bring them to you. And ancient hospitals were non-existent—you needed someone to visit you and provide care for you.

MATTHEW 25:31-46 (NRSV)

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

SERMON

UPSET: This worship service is the liturgical equivalent of New Years Eve. It's the last Sunday of the Liturgical Year. We're now in year C, next Sunday we'll begin the three year cycle anew in year A. Like New Years Eve, this day is a special day. It's traditionally called "Christ the King Sunday." But also sometimes referred to as "Reign of Christ" Sunday

DEEPENING: Whether we call it "Christ the King" or "Reign of Christ," this Sunday is a celebration of the coming reign of God before we shift to the Season of advent and begin waiting for our Lord all over again.

This day is important enough that we moved our celebration of Thanksgiving Sunday forward a week to leave space for it. But why is it so important?

SUDDEN SHIFT/GOSPEL: It's important because although we often treat the Kingdom of God as a footnote, it's actually central to the whole Gospel. In some ways it is the whole gospel. Indeed it's importance is found in the very choice of the early church, including the authors of the new testament, to use the word Gospel to describe what God had done in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

UNPACKING: The greek word Gospel was the term used when the Romans announced to the world that there was a new emperor. It conveyed the news that a new political order had been established. Those who had established it, the new Roman emperor and his cohort, considered it good news. And because they had the power of the empire behind them, it was in the best interests of ordinary people like you and me to go along with them.

It's into that world, where the term "gospel" or "good news" had the political meaning of a new king on the throne that the early church proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And they meant it the way the Romans did, but with Christ rather than Caesar as king. They weren't proclaiming a private or interior gospel limited to one's inner spiritual life. They were proclaiming that Jesus Christ, and not the Roman emperor, ruled the world.

They were proclaiming the news that something had happened in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ that had changed history. They were proclaiming that Jesus had won, that his victory had already made the world a better place and that one day his triumph over sin and death would be complete and undeniable.

Now, the reign of King Jesus—both already here and still on the way—brings with it such things as the forgiveness of sins, resurrection to eternal life, and the renewal of heaven and earth. But we have often treated these things as main points and left the reign of Christ at the bottom of the page as a mere footnote. And that is a mistake.

The ancient Christian gospel was a political proclamation. The gospel remains a political proclamation today. When Christ is King, fully and completely, God's will, and God's will alone, shall be done on earth as in heaven. In this coming Kingdom, God will be all in all and the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Jesus himself paints us a picture of what that will look like in today's Gospel reading. Those whose allegiance to Jesus has led them to care for the least, the last and the lost will find themselves fit for a place in Christ's kingdom. It is those who gave food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothing to the naked and care for the most vulnerable (like the sick and imprisoned) who will experience the completeness of his reign as good news.

It's vitally important that we keep the main thing the main thing. And the main thing about the Gospel is that the proclamation that the Reign of God has begun in the one who was crucified and raised on the third day. It has begun in the one who proclaimed, (Luke 4) that he had come to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, the forgiveness of debts and the redistribution of land.

That, you may be thinking to yourself, would be a revolution. Indeed it would. But it will not be brought about by the political left or the political right, but rather by the suffering servant and those who follow him.

It will be a revolution. Jesus has promised us nothing less. He suffered and died for nothing less. He rose for nothing less. God will be satisfied with nothing less.

With that revolution, heaven and earth, God's dimension and ours will be brought together, fully and completely at last. In that world remade anew, we will have resurrected bodies free from pain and decay and death. In those new bodies we shall live as forgiven people who sin no more. In those new glorious bodies we will recognize those who have gone before us.

But all those things, wonderful as they are, are not the main thing. The main thing will be that Jesus is King and through him God will then reign on earth as in heaven.

Under the reign of God, everyone will sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees and no one will make them afraid. (Micah 4:4) Under the reign of God there will be a safe, secure place for the least, the lost, and the last. Under the reign of God there will be a place for those who's allegiance to Christ the King led them to care for the least of these.

Amen.