

Sharing God's Plan

Meditation on Matthew 25: 30ff

Here, in the story of the Last Judgment, what makes some blessed is the fact that, though they didn't realize it, in seeing the poor and helping them, they saw and helped Jesus. By contrast, what makes others cursed is that they never really did see Jesus' suffering and in need because they never really saw the poor. The king addresses each of two groups as either blessed or cursed and announces the consequences - enter into the kingdom or depart from him. He shares with them his points for making these assignments, a need that they either met or did not meet: "I was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or in prison and you fed me, gave me drink, welcomed me clothed me, visited me, came to see me."

Then the blessed ask the "when" question? "When did we see you hungry, etc. and meet your needs?"

Of course, those who are accursed ask the same question in verse 44, but for a different reason, to attempt to excuse themselves from punishment. The answer to both the blessed and the accursed group is the same. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it (or did not do it) to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (vv. 40, 45).

The kingdom of heaven shows up where we least expect it. The presence of Jesus is hidden in the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, and the imprisoned. They are not only the "brothers or sisters" of Jesus; Jesus identifies himself with them. As in the Good Samaritan, the one who both saw and acted with compassion was the neighbour to the man in the ditch, so here it is the group that both saw and met the needs of the suffering that is blessed.

Blessedness comes from active compassion toward those who society and, in some cases, religion, have judged as not worthy and therefore to be excluded. The parable points out that we as individuals, as churches, and as a society, are often not very good at judging others. We are too harsh or we are too lax. We judge by appearances, or we make assumptions about the depths of others' feelings and experiences that are not ours to

make. We exclude and we make allowances on grounds other than those set forth in God's eyes. When we set ourselves up as judge over others, we promote ourselves above our human competence.

We need a better, wiser judge than ourselves. Who is that judge, according to Matthew's gospel? Throughout his Gospel, Matthew offers a number of titles for Jesus. Jesus is the Son of Mary and Joseph, the royal Messiah who was proclaimed king at his birth and whom wise men came to worship. He is the Son of God. He is also the Son of Man who combines qualities of servanthood and suffering with majesty and exaltation. The same Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head etc etc...

This parable combines the very different qualities of the Son of Man. He is the majestic, exalted Judge and King whose identity is hidden in the poor.

We will be judged by the extent to which we see, have compassion, and act in response to his sufferings in the world. The story of the Last Judgement calls us to evaluate our own actions...

And what can help us here is an interpretation of today's sermon text in the painting of an African artist.

The painter of this piece of art from Togo invites us to see the story of the Last Judgement taking place in the slum of an African metropolis. In the century of globalisation what we do here in Europe relates to the lives of people who live on the other side of the world. What we do to them, we do to Jesus. And what we fail to do for them we don't do for Jesus either.

At first sight the picture seems chaotic. Shacks and poverty, lack of space, dirt and dust, crowds of people. Streets in a slum somewhere in this world. And in the centre a strong woman with a heavy load...

At the horizon: oil tanks, chemical industry. Bank and business buildings displace the quarters of the poor.

God in the picture, so the artist, is particularly walking with the group of women and men on the path of the cross through a world of suffering and death into the light of the

resurrection. On their signs we read “I am thirsty...” and “Forgive them...” Both remind us of Jesus’ last words on the cross.

The painter allows the African people to connect their suffering and their desire for life – full, fair and just – with the suffering of Jesus.

Thirst must be stilled. Reconciliation made possible. Human rights realized even in the poorest spot of the world. It is those who follow Jesus, who will make the difference.

It is all about life in the slums.

The people of whom the painting speaks live in such places.

We meet people who are thirsty... not only for fresh water but also for life in fullness and justice. In the painting the people who walk in the demonstration carrying their cross also carry a banner saying “I am thirsty”. Close to them we can see a strong woman pulling a cart with a barrel of water. Two children help her and push it...

Above the woman’s head two people’s thirst is stilled out of a huge jug which a woman holds. And a bit further to the right again a woman holding food and drink offers genuine welcome to the strangers who are just leaving their little refugee boats.

Clean water is so essential on the African continent, and people often lack this most basic means for life.

We meet people who are hungry. And again we can see the woman who welcomes the strangers with water and bread. Next to her vegetables are grown by the inhabitants of the slums. And a car takes the products and transports them safely to where they are needed most.

We meet sick people. In the painting we see the hospital right in the middle below the dove and the throne which are both symbolizing the spirit and the presence of God.

The sick are cared for and where this happens God is right among his people.

In another corner of the picture we meet people in a centre for counselling learning what they need to know about basic health issues...

We meet people who need clothing. And who make it. In the painting there is a weaver who weaves traditional African clothes. He uses the old skills to earn a living and is depending on customers who buy what he produces.

We meet children who go to school and children who play. Both things that often are not possible for the children in the slums of this world. But without playful learning and without school education these children have no prospect for the future. The power to change their living conditions in the slums lies in education. As long as children have to work and earn money to help their families survive, they will never escape the vicious circle of poverty and hopelessness.

We meet all these people.

And we meet Jesus who tells us that it is him who we meet in them.

If we understand Jesus correctly and take his words seriously we cannot try and look the other way. We have to see our sisters and brothers and relate to them.

We have to react and get involved.

The kingdom of heaven shows up where we least expect it. The presence of Jesus is hidden in the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, and the imprisoned.

On our way with Jesus we cannot ignore the poorest of the poor. We have to stand there with them, stay with them, watch, pray, and act.

Beside the poverty in the painting we can see the hope of the people, their will for life, their skills and abilities, and their dreams for a better future for the African continent.

And it is not only their skills and abilities, their dreams that we see if we follow Christ, but the skills, abilities and dreams of all those in this world who are poor, naked, hungry, thirsty or in need of any other thing that they would need for a good, satisfying and happy life.

Let us help where we can, to make the dream of a just and peaceful world come true.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.