

I Was Hungry and You Fed Me

Kathleen Rushton comments on the parable Jesus told in Matthew 25:31-46 of the great judgement.

THE SCENE OF THE Great Judgement reveals a new dimension of the “Emmanuel – God-with-us” framework which unfolds throughout the Gospel according to Matthew (1:23; 18:20; 28:20).

On one hand, we see Jesus the exalted One who comes in glory accompanied by “all the angels” and who possesses, and is about to exercise, all power and authority in heaven and on earth.

On the other hand, this exalted heavenly One publicly claims and declares that he identifies with the disadvantaged and marginalised of the world – “the least of my brothers and sisters” whom he came among “not to be served (*diakoneō*) but to serve (*diakoneō*)” (Mt 20:28 NRSV) and had nowhere to lay his head (Mt 8:20).

Self-Identification of Jesus

The self-identification of Jesus which spans the “distance” between the divine and “the least” of the humanity reveals a new depth to his two-part response to the question about which commandment of the Torah is the “greatest” (Mt 22:34-40).

Australian biblical interpreter Brendan Byrne explains that: “In loving and serving one’s neighbour in the way described here one is loving and serving Christ, and in loving



and serving Christ one is loving and serving ‘God with us!’ The two great commandments of the Torah making up the “greatest commandment of the Torah”, come together in Jesus.

Matthew’s Community

Matthew’s community most likely lived in Antioch, the third largest city in the Roman Empire. Sociologist Rodney Stark tells us that any “accurate picture of Antioch in New Testament times must depict a city filled with misery, danger, fear, despair and hatred.” This was a city “where the average family lived a squalid life in filthy and cramped quarters, where at least half the children died at birth or during infancy and where most children who lived lost at least one parent.” The city was filled “with hatred and fear rooted in intense ethnic antagonisms and exacerbated by a constant stream of strangers.” The city lacked stable networks.

Above all, Antioch was repeatedly smashed by disastrous catastrophes which meant a “resident could expect to be homeless from time to time, providing he or she was among the survivors.”

World Turned Upside-Down

Matthew’s community lived in these socio-economic, political and physical realities. The collection of rents and taxes is the basis for the parable of Mt 18:23-35. A wealthy landowner and day labourers come together in the parable of the householder (Mt 20:1-16).

In this urban society, where are we to locate Matthew’s community? Although this Gospel frequently refers to Jesus’s involvement with the poor and the marginalised and to his sending of disciples among this group (Mt 10:7-8; 25:31-45), we cannot assume that Matthew’s community consisted of only

the poor and the marginalised. This Gospel was also addressed to a more privileged audience to remind them of their responsibility to engage in God's mission of mercy among the disadvantaged.

American pastor J D Greear insightfully reminds us that: "The early Church has no building, no money and political influence. And they turned the world upside-down."

Call to Minister to Others

The significance of following Jesus by recognising him in the needy and least is found in the word which sums up all these actions: "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or in prison, and did not minister (*diakoneō*) to you?" (Mt 25:44).

While obscured in translations (eg, "take care of you" [NRSV]; "come to your help" [JB]), "minister" describes all these works of mercy. It sums up God's mission as lived out by Jesus "who came not to be ministered to but to minister" (Mt 20:28); the actions of angels who minister to Jesus when he is tempted in the desert (Mt 4:11); and of the women disciples who minister to him and the other disciples (Mt 8:15, 27:55).

Classical and early Christian use of *diakoneō* suggests an activity of an in-between kind. This word was found in classical literature in passages of a profoundly religious nature and is associated with one who is called to represent and speak on behalf of another. Earliest Christianity adapted this term to speak of ministry. And here, it names God's mission of mercy among the dispossessed. The only criterion in the Last Judgement scene is whether a person "ministered to or did not minister to" Jesus who is present in, and identifies with, our brother or sister in need.

Heart of Our Theological Tradition

Moral theologian James Keenan sees that our entire theological tradition is expressed in terms of mercy which he defines as "the willingness to enter into the chaos of others." Attending to someone in need is no simple matter because it means entering into the entire "problem" or "chaos" of that person's particular situation.

Keenan continues: "Understood in such terms, the creation is an act of mercy that brings order into the chaos of the universe. The Incarnation is God's entry into the chaos of human existence."

Here and Now

The Church hearing Matthew's Gospel proclaimed today also lives in socio-economic, political and physical realities akin to those in which the Christian community lived in Antioch. In a world besieged by social and structural sin, our local church may remain focused on itself rather than on our part within the larger mission of God. We are called to look where the Holy Spirit is already active outside the Church itself and to discern what is God calling the community to be.

Here and now, under God's guidance, we can contribute to the well-being of people in our local area through community development. And we can attend to needs by recognising and developing strengths, self-

reliance, capacity building and letting the voice of people be heard through advocacy. In participating in the dynamic and evolving mission of God, we minister to Jesus who identifies with "the least of my brothers and sisters."

Eighth Work of Mercy

The expansive nature of the traditional corporal and spiritual works of mercy now includes an eighth work – care of our common home. The eighth work is both a spiritual work of gratefully contemplating God's world and a corporal work of performing daily gestures that help to build a better world. This calls for an examination of conscience in acknowledging human contribution to ecological devastation and for a firm resolution to live and act differently.

We have seen how the two great commandments come together in Jesus. In loving and serving our neighbour and care of Earth, we are loving and serving Christ, and in loving and serving Christ we are loving and serving "God with us," the Creator of our common home. ✦

Scripture Reading Mt 25:31-46 for 26 November

The Last Judgement, Giudizio Universale by Michelangelo Buonarroti (1534-41)
Fresco on altar wall of Sistine Chapel The Vatican Museums Rome

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