

‘One of the least of these’

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, All Saints’ Belmont, November 22nd 2020

Keynote Bible Reading: Matthew 25.31 – 40

Down through history men and women have uttered memorable words or sayings. We are reminded of this in the opening of the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament. ‘In the past God spoke to our ancestors many times and in many ways through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son. He is the one through whom God created the universe, the one whom God has chosen to possess all things at the end. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being...’ (1.13)

Jesus in his earthly ministry was known for his teaching, his parables and pithy sayings. Sometimes he was addressed as ‘Teacher.’ One such is the theme of today, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are my family, you did it to me.’ (Matthew 25.40). Keeping this in mind, there have been others who have echoed those words of Jesus. Paul Reeves on becoming bishop outlined his ministry: ‘I hope we shall have a commitment and positive bias towards the poor, the oppressed and the stranger in our midst.’ When being promoted to become bishop our Bishop Justin declared his ‘concern for the last, the lost and the least.’ Each of these is surely a challenge for the church. Jesus led the way, and encouraged his followers toward feeding the hungry, offering the thirsty a drink, providing hospitality and clothing, taking care of the sick and visiting those in prison. The ‘spiritual aspect’ was that as they engaged in these good works, they did it for and in Jesus indwelling.

Yet despite technological progress and people’s caring, there are horrendous social problems in our world, and not only the effects of COVID-19.

- 1) One which affects world population is the *plight of refugees*, of persons and families displaced by war, famine, economic situations, so many are being made homeless and choosing to leave their abode. Refugee camps house thousands, and we are mindful of the boat people and hazards arising. Examples are the Yazidhi people of Iraq, Kurds in Syria and Turkey, ethnic minorities in China, Rohingya people in Myanmar, and tribal people displaced by war in Yemen. Dwellers in some island nations are being forced to leave their homes because of rising sea levels and the outcome of weather extremes. Appreciation must be accorded those nations willing to accept refugees, including our own country, albeit a small number. In being aware of the needs of these folk one’s memory is drawn to the Holy Family having to become refugees fleeing their nation because of persecution and spending time in Egypt when Jesus was a boy.
- 2) A second aspect we can note from Jesus’ example in caring was *healing in community*. We are aware of Jesus healing those with physical needs, and also emotional and spiritual. When a few years ago I did a study of Jesus’ healing in Luke’s Gospel I noticed that in almost every situation as well as these he restored the needy person(s) to community. A most obvious example was those with leprosy. And also the man with demons was sent

back to his hometown, delivered of his affliction. We are reminded that the woman who came to the well – alone, probably despised because of her marital relationships. After her encounter with Jesus the whole village came out to see this changed person. Zaccheus because of his working as a tax collector for the despised Romans, on leaving was restored by Jesus to his 'Jewishness', pronounced 'a son of Abraham.' Such examples remind us that there are ones today we call 'marginalised' are isolated or separated from community. These with 'special needs include ones with mental health issues, some with a disability, former prisoners. Should they decide to come to a church community it is a ministry to 'welcome the stranger.' What I came to more realise is that the church can be 'a community of the compassionate.' Here, those 'the last, the lost and the least' might find a welcome.

- 3) A third aspect is the *practical needs* of people. Hence the role of the City Mission and other caring agencies, the Foodbanks and opportunity for the congregation to give to these. The *economic* effects of COVID-19 are more being felt in our own country. When we read the Acts of the Apostles we are mindful of how they shared with each other so people were not in need. See the descriptions in Acts 2 and 4 ('the group of believers were one in mind and heart, they shared with one another and the money was distributed according to the needs of the people), and Barnabas was singled out for his generosity. Paul too commended the church of Corinth for their provision in a time of famine. (2 Cor 9).

- 4) A fourth aspect is the *need for prayer for the* needy to be helped and for governments to exercise generosity and assist where needed. This can include a response to the island nations of the Pacific from the effects of climate changing and sea levels rising and storms surges damage when hurricanes are ravaging villages.

In conclusion and at the back of our mind are those words of Jesus commending our compassion: 'Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these my family, you did it to me.'