Lectio Divina – Last Sunday of the Year – Feast of Christ the King Year A

Matthew's Gospel (in brief)

- Composed between 80-90 CE
- Author is anonymous, but named as 'Matthew the tax collector' by later tradition.
- Written in scholarly 'synagogue' Greek.
- Incorporates almost the entire Gospel of Mark, plus material from Q and material unique to Matthew.
- Structured around 5 major discourses (each ends with the phrase: "When Jesus had finished….":
    1. Prologue – chapters 1- 4 Genealogy, Nativity & Infancy
    2. 1st: 5-7 Sermon on the Mount
    3. 2nd: 10 Missionary Discourse
    4. 3rd: 13 Parable Discourse
    5. 4th: 18 Community Discourse
    6. 5th: 23-25 Apocalyptic Judgement Discourses
- May be a parallel for the 5 books of the Pentateuch - Jesus the new Moses.
- Jesus first words are 'to fulfil all righteousness'.
- A handbook for Church leaders to assist them in teaching and preaching, worship, mission and polemic.
- 2 broad categories: discourse & narrative.
- The only Gospel to explicitly mention the 'Church' – Matthew is theologian of the church.
- Initially addressed to a Jewish-Christian audience – only late in the Gospel is there openness to Gentiles.
- Names Jesus as 'Messiah' at the very beginning and throughout the Gospel.

Matthew 25:31-46 - things to notice

- For the last 3 Sundays we have been reading the whole of chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel – beginning with the parable about the bridesmaids, then the parable about the Talents, and now: the parable of the sheep and the goats. This is the final chapter in Matthew before the passion narrative begins. This is the grand finale of the fifth discourse.
- Only Matthew has this parable about judgement.
- "When the Son of Man comes…" Jesus seems to name himself
- "He will take his seat on his throne of glory…" Jesus likens himself to a king. Note that it is Jesus doing the judging (not the Father).
- "All the nations…" this may actually mean 'the Church' (not the world) since it is to 'disciples' that the teaching of Jesus has mainly been addressed in Matthew's Gospel. The last 2 Sunday Gospels make the point that the Kingdom has been entrusted to Jesus' disciples and the necessity of producing the works of the Kingdom. It is to Jesus that they must give an account of themselves.
- 'Sheep' are identified with the good, those blessed by the Father, those who will inherit the Kingdom.
- 'Goats' are identified with the bad, those cursed, those who will inherit the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Note: goats were an animal of lesser value than sheep in the time of Jesus. The actual Greek word used here normally means 'kid', so perhaps the goats are those disciples who didn't 'grow' in faith and love – cf the previous 2 parables.
- Judgement depends on whether or not the disciple has:
    - fed the hungry
    - given water to the thirsty
    - been hospitable to the stranger
    - clothed the naked
    - looked after or nursed (not visited) the sick
    - visited those in prison
- Those who did these things (the sheep) are blessed by Jesus and inherit the Kingdom. They express surprise – possibly because their love is genuine, they are not trying to 'buy off' God to win the Kingdom for themselves. They are sincerely and naturally motivated to 'deeds of loving kindness', the 'good works' which well up from faith in Jesus.

- Those who did not do these things are cursed and sent to eternal fire with the devil and his angels. They, too, express surprise. It is almost like they are saying, "But didn't we do all the right things?" Whatever they did do, they did not show the deeds of loving kindness to others.
- They go to eternal punishment and the 'virtuous' to eternal life.
- Notice that the list occurs FOUR times in the parable. Repetition in biblical texts is a way of underlining how important a word or phrase is. Another is the use of the phrase, 'I tell you solemnly…', which occurs twice in this parable. Perhaps this is the most emphasised and underlined passage in Matthew's Gospel and perhaps in any of the Gospels – that's how important Matthew thinks it is.
- Notice that Jesus is both at the centre as King and at the margins with hurting human beings.
- What's missing from the list? It is surprising, perhaps, that Jesus does not mention prayer, liturgical worship, giving of tithes or indeed any identifiably 'religious' activities. The most probable explanation is that all those religious things by which we nourish our awareness of God and celebrate God's presence are presumed in this text. But attending to 'religious duties' is not the sole occupation of the disciple.
- At the end of the day, the disciple is called to BE the Kingdom (living presence) of God in the world and to transform the suffering of its people into joy by deeds of loving kindness. the goats appear to have made horrible situations suffered by human beings worse by their neglect, their lack of love.
- The virtuous disciple IS the living presence of Jesus in the world. He or she realises that Jesus has entrusted the kingdom into his/her hands. In the Kingdom of Jesus, the disciple is not master but 'servant' (remember how frequently we have heard about the first being last and the last first?)
- The virtuous disciple does not 'revert to type' (ie, playing the master, being lazy, fearful) when the king is absent or delayed. His/her understanding and love keeps him/her warm and alive, industrious with the life and gifts of the kingdom, and a true servant to his/her brothers and sisters.
- The whole idea of 'kingdom' has been thoroughly re-written in the teaching of Jesus: there is only one master and you are all brothers… The disciples are indeed kings – they have the power of Jesus' spirit in them. But this power is not to be exercised in the classical sense 'having power over others', but of being servant. The power of the spirit of Jesus fuels deeds of loving kindness for the brothers and sisters of Jesus – reversing horrible human conditions, and bringing healing and salvation.
- This is, once again, a 'warning' parable for disciples to make sure that they are living the life of the Kingdom properly. It is not meant as a 'prophecy' about the last day. It is meant for the careful consideration of the disciples in their attempt to live the life of the kingdom which has been entrusted to them.
- Disciples are not to repeat the mistake of the Pharisees in objectifying faith in God and reducing it to external observance.
- Disciples are to seize the life (grace) of the Kingdom within them, to work industriously with this great gift so that the life of Jesus in them overflows into deeds of loving kindness; so that, becoming one in heart and mind with Christ (as St Paul puts it), the disciples becomes Christ in his/her moment of history, seeing, thinking and acting as Jesus does.

Liturgical Setting for this Sunday

The first reading this Sunday is from the prophet Ezekiel and talks about God as the 'good shepherd'. God is among his people, keeping watch over them, rescuing them, gathering them, feeding them, bringing back the stray, healing the injured and making the weak strong.

God will judge his people separating sheep from sheep and rams from he-goats.

As usual, the reading functions to provide a wonderful introduction to the Gospel. It basically says, 'This is what God is about in relation to human beings'.

Reflection - Being the living presence of God

Only Matthew tells us this story of final judgement in the Kingdom of God. He paints a picture of the glorious arrival of the King and the assembly of all the nations of people who are then separated into two groups, sheep and goats.

Judgement is then pronounced - not on the basis of physical beauty, wealth, power, status or even religious practice.

What determines who will inherit the eternal life of the Kingdom are the works of service done to fellow human beings in need: the hungry, the thirty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison.

Perhaps surprisingly, there is no mention in the list of religious duties like prayer, liturgical worship, fasting, giving tithes or indeed any identifiably religious practice.

Very likely these things are presumed to be present in all the assembled people. But, the difference between the two groups is how they responded to fellow human beings in need.

At the end of the day, the disciple is called to be the Kingdom (living presence) of God in the world and to transform the suffering of its people into joy by deeds of loving kindness. The goats appear to have made horrible situations suffered by human beings worse by their neglect, their lack of love.

The virtuous disciple is the living presence of Jesus in the world. He or she realises that Jesus has entrusted the kingdom into his/her hands. In the Kingdom of Jesus, the disciple is not master but 'servant' - remember how frequently we have heard about the first being last and the last first?

The whole idea of 'kingdom' has been thoroughly re-written in the teaching of Jesus: there is only one master and you are all brothers… The disciples are indeed kings – they have the power of Jesus' spirit in them. But this power is not to be exercised in the classical sense 'having power over others', but by being true servants. The power of the spirit of Jesus fuels deeds of loving kindness for the brothers and sisters of Jesus – reversing horrible human conditions and bringing healing and salvation.

This is, once again, a 'warning' parable for disciples to make sure that they are living the life of the Kingdom properly. It is not meant as a 'prophecy' about the last day. It is meant for careful consideration by the disciples in their attempt to live the life of the kingdom which has been entrusted to them.

Disciples of Jesus are not to repeat the mistake of the Pharisees in objectifying faith in God and reducing it to external observance.

Disciples are to seize the life (grace) of the Kingdom within them, to work industriously with this great gift so that the life of Jesus at work in them overflows into deeds of loving kindness; so that, becoming one in heart and mind with Christ (as St Paul puts it), the disciple becomes Christ in his/her moment of history - seeing, thinking and acting as Jesus would.