

Sermon  
St Margaret's Uniting Church, Mooroolbark – 26<sup>th</sup> November 2017  
Matthew 25: 31-46.  
Sarah Tomilson

The room was heavy with heat, laden with a suffocating cocktail of dust, gasoline and ripping fruit from the open market stall below our flat. Suffocating? No perhaps nauseating is a more accurate word, for the perspective of one who has a particularly nasty form of gastro. I imagine many of you would relate to the experience of being unwell in a foreign country, and yes, my most sincere empathy for you. This was my first experience of it. We had been travelling in Lebanon for the past three weeks and had totally fallen in love with the place. However staying in a little flat in Beirut, in a local Shia neighbourhood, with no shops open because it just happened to be Eid – the festival celebrating the end of Ramadan - it was proving very difficult for my husband to find any food that I could actually keep down. Which was made all the more glorious when a woman we had just met a few days either, heard I was sick and came over with a large pot of the most delicious lemon chicken soup. I nearly wept with the kindness bestowed and the generosity of someone who hardly knew us at all cooking something nourishing and delicious so that I could get better. And in that moment I loved her.

Today's passage, from the gospel of Matthew, at least at first glance, is a hairy one. A description from Jesus, as the Son of Man, coming in glory to separate the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the condemned, in the final judgement. It is an apocalyptic vision. As the Jewish writer of Matthew was familiar with a Jewish apocalyptic thinking, writing for his community in first century Palestine. We know from elsewhere in Matthew's gospel, he does not shy away from judgment, and the rather chilling imagery of fiery furnaces, eternal punishment. It is the kind of imagery that ignited the imaginations of our most well-known artists of the western tradition, Dante's *Divine Comedia* and the multiple frescoes of the Last Judgement of the Italian renaissance.

It would be valuable to spend time exploring the history, meaning and use the last judgement in Christian traditions and its connection to the second coming, particularly as it has left a legacy that in many ways is contradictory to the gospel message of abundant life, of forgiveness, of grace. So, worthy as such exploration would be, I going to leave that one for today.

But there still is something more to say about the way judgement is used in this passage.

“I was hungry and you gave me food. I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was sick and you took care of me.”

What is the nature of the actions judged? One of the commentaries I was reading to prepare for today said these are not just good works, doing the right thing, but specifically acts of mercy, acts of compassion.

Actually, wherever divine judgement is dolled out in the scriptures, it is usually referring to the failure to act with mercy. All throughout the older testament and the psalms, the prophets condemn those in power who neglect those who are the most vulnerable, the widow the orphan. Judgement is made most harshly specifically on those who fail to care, not simply those who fail to follow the religious rule. In the same commentary, noted the significance of the prophet Hosea “what I want is mercy not sacrifice,” which is quoted in Matthew several times. So, we could say the gospel of Matthew’s concern with judgement is actually a powerful desire for mercy. It is the other side of the same coin.

Mercy to give and to receive mercy. I wonder what comes to mind when you think of the word mercy, what images or connotations does it hold for you? I find it hard to look past the school yard game of mercy...

Interestingly the word for “mercy” is translated for a cluster of Hebrew words. *Ahavah* – which suggests God’s enduring love, like the love in a marriage, or long term commitment.

*Rachamim* – shares the root word for womb, originating, holding, maternal love.

One definition of mercy I found was “love that responds to human need in unexpected or unmerited ways.” I love the use of the word ‘unexpected’, it has something of the quality of freedom, of a grace bestowed freely given. Of that Lebanese chicken soup made by a stranger...

What is really at the heart of this passage. Is Christ’s identification with those who are the most vulnerable. Those who are living on the edges of society, those who do not have a home, those who are currently experiencing the trauma in Manus Island and Nauru, those who have been shunned by the majority for their differences, those who are deeply in need but have somehow been hidden from view.

This passage is saying that Christ is found in those who are suffering the most, to serve them is to serve Christ in a very real sense, and caring for those who are suffering is bringing into being something of the kingdom of God. It shares something of the vision given to us in the Ephesians passage we heard today. Something of the hope of the kingdom and the wisdom of God is lived out in the acts of compassion, in acts of kindness.

“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.”

And I know many of us here carry with us the stories of people who are the least of these. Those we have cared for, and continue to care for, those who are sick, those who are suffering because of the workings of a heartless government immigration policy, or have fallen through the cracks of the system.

Let’s take a moment now to honour the stories and the lives of the people we walk along side, and to offer a prayer of strength and solidarity for each other...

(pause)

May we continue to find practical ways of caring for the least of these, and for supporting each other.

Pope Francis declared last year the Holy Year of Mercy, in his letter marking the beginning of the year, he wrote Jesus’ mercy is not abstract but visceral – it is something that quite literally changes us from the inside out. Perhaps this is also an encouragement to be ready to be changed. That just as we care for the ‘least’ of these, that there are times when the least of these has been us too. I know, in a small, way from that room in Beirut the power of an unexpected act of love. This is the mustard seed that can turn into the grandest tree.

**Amen**