

Testing times...
Matthew 25: 31-46
Reign of Christ Sunday
26 November 2017
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‘Today’s examination is on the subject of Jesus and judgement in Matthew’s Gospel.

Listen carefully.

Follow all instructions of the supervisors so you don’t break examination rules.

Do not open your examination packs or write anything in any booklets until you are told to do so.

Mobile phones can only be in the examination room inside the emergency pack underneath your chair.

Phone and watch alarms must be off.

If you still have a mobile phone or electronic device on you, please raise your hand now...’

What you’ve just heard is only part of the ‘pre-exam briefing’ that more than 150,000 young New Zealanders have recently been hearing on a more or less regular basis as they’ve been lining up to sit level one, two or three NCEA exams.

It has been quite literally a testing time for the teenagers with whom I work over the last several weeks.

If, like me, you belong to a generation that pre-dates the national certificate of educational achievement, you may be able to remember what it felt like when you were preparing for exams for school certificate or university entrance. And if you can’t remember that, then maybe getting ready to sit a driving test or some other qualification may spring to mind. Wherever your mind goes when you hear the words ‘test’ or ‘examination, I want to invite you simply to reflect for a second on the feelings that start surfacing.

On the occasions when you’ve been ‘examined’ or ‘tested’, what has that really been like? Sometimes – especially when we do well – the experience of being examined can be exhilarating, but it is also almost always stressful to a greater or lesser degree. And for me, the level of stress associated with examinations is usually inversely proportional to the amount of time and effort expended on preparation, which is a fancy way of saying ‘practice makes perfect’ or ‘if you fail to plan, you’re planning to fail.’

Thomas Edison claimed that ‘genius is 1 % inspiration and 99 perspiration,’ And as an Army Chaplain I remember hearing the mantra ‘sweating more in peace means bleeding less in war.’ In whichever form they’re encountered, the principle behind proverbs like these is that working hard to prepare for things is important; indeed it’s necessary if we want to succeed in the various tests we will face throughout life.

But that immediately raises a number of bigger questions. How do we measure success, for example, and what are the most significant tests for us? Are they like school examinations that we can study and prepare for, or do they sometimes sneak up on us unexpectedly, like earthquakes or illness, and when that happens, what do we do?

Perhaps the biggest question we’re faced with today is one that underlies both of our readings, and that is: what is the ultimate purpose and test of our faith?

Why bring all this up as we prepare to start advent, with the Santa Parade and Christmas in the Park already behind us and the deluge of Christmas advertising well on the way to engulfing us for another year? Some of you may recall that this is the second year – in a row – that I’ve been

invited to preach at Cashmere on ‘Christ the King’ Sunday. This has always been a rather uncomfortable festival for me for a couple of reasons that have nothing to do with my name. First, because the idea of ‘Kings reigning’ doesn’t sit too well with the way Jesus lived – as a suffering servant; and second, because the image of Christ as a benevolent ruler doesn’t exactly leap out of the readings the lectionary offers us today.

The most prominent image in both of today’s readings is of God and Christ as a shepherd, with the implication in the Gospel reading that Christ also acts as a pretty stern judge. The sheep and the goats is a stark and unsettling story; can we be certain that Jesus actually told it at all? According to the scholars who formed the Jesus seminar, for example, this story tells us more about the agenda of the writer of Matthew’s Gospel than it tells us about Jesus himself.

Matthew is widely acknowledged as the most Jewish of the Gospels; written around the year 70 CE for followers of Jesus who were experiencing persecution in Palestine, Matthew’s Gospel is recognised as being apocalyptic and eschatological, which is a typically academic way of saying the Gospel writer was trying to reveal something important about the imminent end of the world. And the end of the world in the story we heard this morning involves the judgement *of the nations*, which apparently back then meant *the Gentiles* or *the non-Jewish others*. In other words, this story was not originally intended as a parable about the judgement of Jesus’ followers, who eventually became ‘the Church.’

Of course the world did not end with that first generation of Christians, so this story – and many more like it – became something of an ongoing challenge to people of faith. To start with, the story rests on the assumption that the difference between the blessed and the cursed is not immediately, visibly obvious. Sheep and goats were virtually indistinguishable in first century Palestine, and still are in that part of the world to this day. Secondly, the story claims that the sole criterion for deciding between the ‘blessed’ and the ‘cursed’ is how they’ve responded to simple human need and suffering, and that’s especially unsettling for Protestants, who have usually been taught that salvation has nothing to do with human works, and everything to do with God’s grace and human faith. I’ll say a bit more about that later, but for now I want to note simply that any text must be read in its context, and in the wider context of Matthew’s Gospel there are many other criteria given for judgement.

It should also be noted that scholars continue to debate what Matthew or Jesus meant by saying ‘the least of these.’ Some say this phrase refers to Christians, and that ‘the nations’ will be judged according to how the least of Jesus’ followers have been treated by them. Considering that when these words were written, Christians were routinely tortured to death and fed to lions, this particular meaning makes a lot of sense. It still makes sense now in countries where people of faith face persecution, but it didn’t make sense after Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire about three centuries after Matthew’s words were written, And the world in which we live is still feeling the after-effects of what happened when an anti-establishment religious movement turned into a force of political and military power. But I digress.

Whatever identities are ascribed to its characters, at the heart of this story – and often overlooked by interpreters – there is a whole lot of ignorance. Ignorance about the difference between sheep and goats to begin with, and ignorance about the identity of the true recipient of all those good and not so good deeds. It’s interesting to note that the sheep and the goats, the condemned and the righteous, offer the same response to the punch-line of this story. When told that in responding to the needs of others they were effectively meeting and serving Jesus, both groups respond by saying ‘we had no idea.’

The implication of that little statement is the exact opposite of what's often formed the backbone of popular piety: 'Do some good deeds, build up some Brownie points, earn yourself a ticket to heaven at the end of the age.' Wrong, says Jesus.

Helping people because you think it's going to win you God's appreciation is simply disguised self-interest. There's nothing uniquely Christian about doing good things for other people. What's Christian is seeing in others the human face of Jesus, the human face of God. What's Christian is instinctively acting with compassion to meet the needs of those who are labelled 'the least'. The question then becomes 'who are the least in the context of our society?' Sadly there are far too many possible answers.

From the 300 refugees who were on Friday very visibly and forcibly removed from a decommissioned detention centre on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, to the thousands of people suffering invisibly in silence because their homes are blighted by abuse and domestic violence here, there is no shortage of disempowered, dispossessed people in our world at present, and realistically there is no way that we, sitting here this morning, can reach and rescue them all. What we can do is renew our willingness to ask for ourselves some potentially life-changing questions:

What kind of 'exam' would Jesus Christ the servant King set for us if he were testing our faith this morning?

Are we willing to recover the true meaning of faith as suggested by Marcus Borg in his 2003 book 'The Heart of Christianity':¹ Not as 'propositions that we choose to believe' but as a 'way that we chose to be – live.'

On that note, I want to close today by sharing with you part of a story which I think makes this point simply and eloquently. It's taken from a book I was given by a classmate to mark our ordination, which I have drawn upon often down through the years. Entitled 'the Little Things' the story tells of a minister to a small suburban Midwestern congregation. Worried about declining numbers, he decides to do something about it, by subscribing to a programme which will, according to its promotional material, "revolutionize his church's life." He does everything the programme says he should do, with the bemused if not active support of his session, aiming to inspire the congregation into a new era of Christian discipleship and unprecedented numerical growth. We take up the story on the Sunday when he delivers a polished adaptation of the programme's "Invigoration Sermon Outline B." "When the day came, I preached well, although as the words came from my lips they sounded strangely unlike anything that I might ever really say. After the service, as the congregation filed through the greeting line on their way to the coffee hour, I waited expectantly for sermon reactions ...The first person to offer anything beyond the usual pleasantries was Angus MacDowell, the Session Clerk, who said. "Fine sermon, Dave. Minnie and I have always like that sermon, especially the part about the Lord not having any hands but our hands and any feet but our feet. Hadn't heard that one since Reverend Willis back in the fifties..."

As I settled into the living room couch that afternoon, I came to understand that I was being kindly humoured by a congregation that was quite as vigorous, caring and committed as it had any desire to be... I couldn't bear to be in my office the next Tuesday morning, so decided to indulge in a bit of self-care. I went to have my hair cut by the town barber, whose name is Harry. He's about seventy and a chatty type with a repertoire of stale barber jokes. No pension, I suppose, so he keeps cutting hair. He starts every one of my haircuts with "I'm Catholic, but..." I think he says that so I won't ask him to come to church. Harry asked what kinds of things ministers do on the other six days of the week - he wasn't teasing - it was an honest question. I talked about meetings, hospital visits, counselling people who had problems to talk over...

¹ Marcus J. Borg: *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*. HarperSanFrancisco, 2003.

Something I said touched a nerve in Harry, and he began to talk. He talked about his father, whom he called "my old man." My haircut was done, we were alone in the shop. Scissors in one hand, a comb in the other, he was resting them both on my shoulders as he talked. He talked about how his old man mercilessly beat him and his mother most every Saturday night. He talked about how afraid he was, about how much he loved and hated his father; he said he had never told anybody about this before, not in sixty years. His mother, he said, carried the secret to her grave. We were both facing the big barbershop mirror. His eyes were reddening. We looked at each other in the mirror in a way we could not have face to face. I reached up to my shoulders and held his hands, and said something about when you forgive somebody it doesn't mean that you are saying that what they did was all right.

That evening I had a meeting at church but got home fairly early. My wife said that the kids were waiting for their story and goodnight kiss. I was exhausted and would much sooner have collapsed in front of the TV, but I went upstairs and found two little people fighting sleep. They had the book ready, so I read them chapter six of *Thomas the Tank Engine* and they fell asleep before its end. I kissed them both and sat at the edge of the bed for a minute, lost in thought. And sitting there it came to me that of all the meetings I'd attended in the last few days, of all the sermons I'd preached, of all the programmes I'd introduced or tried to introduce, out of everything I'd tried to achieve as a Christian, the most important, the most caring things I'd done were to touch Harry the barber's hands, and to read chapter six of *Thomas the Tank*.

These were important things - not because other things were unimportant. They were important because when it comes to the test, the real mark a human being makes on this world is most often a trail of quiet mercies, and unknown kindnesses, and faithful, daring love.²

Prayer for others and ourselves

God of all life

Every day we're reminded that we live in testing times.

From reports of terror attacks to the latest updates on global warming,

We are constantly bombarded with information about things that seem to be and often are completely beyond our control.

Help us to discern the difference.

Enable us to do what we can to make our world a better, safer, more sustainable place to live for all forms of life on this planet;

And deliver us from pointless worrying about things that we're powerless to influence or change.

We think about the challenges people here and elsewhere face in the aftermath of natural disasters;

We think also of the testing times being forced on people by the death or illness of loved ones, by getting older, moving homes, starting or ending jobs...

We think of the thousands of secondary and tertiary students still studying for and sitting exams the length and breadth of the country

And we pray for the ability to focus, to do as well as they can, and also to recognise that whilst exams and achievements do matter, there is also a great deal more that is worthwhile in life.

We reflect for a moment on what makes our lives worthwhile this morning;

We give thanks for the countless opportunities we have to encounter and embody the spirit of Christ every day.

So even as on this reign of Christ Sunday we pray for those who are chosen to lead and govern our world's communities to do so with compassion and kindness,

² Adapted from 'The little things' in *The Good News from North Haven: A Year in the Life of a Small Town* by Michael L. Lindvall, Bantam Doubleday 1991, pp. 21-25.

We pray also that the qualities that were so evident in Jesus' life and teaching will take root and flourish within and among ourselves.

We pray for...

Refugees on Manus island – homeless people everywhere.

People whose human rights denied because of their gender, their orientation, their religion or race.

Organisations working for justice: Christian World Service, Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders to name just a few.

Prime Minister, government and members of parliament;

Mayor and City Councillors,

People elected to represent the rights and needs of others will perform their tasks wisely and well.

Finally – testing time of Christmas.

May it be less about the gifts and more about the presence:

Being truly present to ourselves and others,

Sharing our common humanity in a spirit of self-giving love.