

*A sermon preached by the Revd Dr Sabina Alkire, Honorary Chaplain, on the Solemnity of Christ the King, Sunday 23 November 2014, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford*

(Matthew 25:31-46)

When my father was an undergraduate he sang in the men's choir. Their director was outstanding. But on one tour the choir decided on a prank. They agreed that when the conductor came to the platform for the first song, and raised his hands, and struck the first beat --- there would be silence. No one would sing. They also agreed, to come in, with full and extra sonorous voice, one bar later.

Evening came, and as expected the conductor entered with great applause and anticipation. He turned to the choir, raised his hands and shoulders, ready to begin the drama. One could see the music already rehearsed in his head, the emotion already playing on his lips. He struck the down beat vigorously. And nothing rung out – at all.

He looked at the choir, astonished. Time stood still. The men were so close physically – literally feet away. Their voices he had trained and knew to be so capable, were inactive. Their faces revealed nothing. He experienced keenly his dependence upon them. For one more second, the tension stretched out, then as one their voices came in, his hands joined, and the performance continued as if it planned that way.

A choir prank to a beloved director may seem to have no bearing on our readings on how to treat the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned; nor on the feast of Christ the King of the Universe that we celebrate today. It is *not* a suggestion to our own clerks. But in a very imperfect way, it may give us a hint of why today's gospel passage rings with passion.

Our reading from Matthew (and it is only in Matthew) catches Jesus with an inner circle in a somewhat melodramatic mood. The conversation is not necessarily historical but its resonant narrative has shaped our faith.

It opens with a cosmic scene, in which the Son of Man, the angels, the messengers of God, and all of humanity are assembled. In the king's judgement of humanity we see the centrality of our treatment of those we encounter who were "hungry, thirsty, naked, homeless, sick, or in prison." The message is strong – human action matters, acts of compassion count, even if they don't feel religious or holy. Through the ages these six acts – caring for the hungry, thirsty, naked, homeless, sick and imprisoned – have become the corporal works of mercy that all Christians are *expected* to perform, together with burying the dead, which is the seventh. And churches from Roman Catholic to Methodist draw on this passage in Matthew to teach Christians of our duties of care.

A rather disconcerting aspect is that this is also a harsh story, and what bothers us as we read it – the bit we want to rub out – is the 'eternal fire' and punishment. But remember this is an extravaganza reading – a scene from Lord of the Rings, not a BBC Documentary. "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all his angels with him." Its purpose is to enflame action, perhaps more than to describe a future occasion in droning detail.

Then there is the surprise factor of what we are *not* here judged for. You might remember that Gregory of Nazianzus wrote on this text in the 4th century: Jesus judges people "not because they have committed theft or sacrilege, or adultery, or have done anything else forbidden by the Law, but because they have not cared for Christ through the needy!" Pondering the

judgement aspect, he asks, “Do you think that kindness to others is not a necessity for you, but a matter of choice? That it is not a law, but simply an exhortation?”<sup>1</sup>

Today we celebrate Christ as King, and we read Matthew because this passage refers first to the Son of Man – a title Jesus used for himself – and then to the King (a much-discussed transition to be sure)<sup>2</sup>. From next week throughout Advent, we will anticipate that our Lord will become incarnate in one cell, in one womb, on one day, in one place. But today at the end of the Christian year we recognise and give thanks that the truth of Christ applies not only to Christians; it covers all humanity, and can already articulate its truth with those of other faiths. The domain to which Christ’s love applies is not confined to even sentient creatures. It is not a domestic arrangement for planet earth, but equally applies across subatomic structures and remote galaxies and all forms of life across the spheres, from now until the end of time. And what we celebrate is not that Jesus the Christ has become an earthly King, mired in compromise, in privilege fame and grandeur. Nor is it that Christ enjoys absolute power to compel virtue. It is that Christ, however humble, loving, and respectful of our freedom, is now recognised as that which alone is invested with ultimate authority, who alone is King.

As King is not the word we all reach for, on this feast last year Pope Francis described Christ as “really *the “brother” around whom God’s people come together.*”<sup>3</sup> Christ the King is not stationed on some remote throne, the Pope reminds us: “Today, [Christ] is here in our midst. He is here right now in his word, and he will be here on the altar, alive and present amid us, his people...” And yet, even as we are extending our vision to the end of the Universe at the end of the year, and to the most holy sacrament of the altar, our text is pointedly drawing our attention to those, outside, in need.

But do our voices carry? I was poring over the documents from the G-20 meeting last weekend week, as usual, to see what had been said or decided about poverty. It was mentioned only in passing, this year. In fact, the most hits for the word poverty referred to two 16-year old students in South Africa, Hlengiwe Moletsane and Ofentse Mahasha, whose essays had won a prize because they described how the G-20 could help reduce poverty in Soweto, where they were from. Voices from the margins can matter – even in elite fora.

But also, now *is* a time in which many wish to have a coordinated response to global poverty and to climate change. Indeed in 8th week this term, on the 4th of December, the UN Secretary General will release his report on the Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs, which are set to replace the Millennium Development Goals that focused on extreme poverty from 2000-2015. So it may be rather a momentous document. Over a million voices, as well as citizen fora, thematic and regional consultations, intergovernmental and expert groups informed the SDGs, which are to be approved at the September 2015 UN General Assembly, and will run for 15 years. The hope is interesting. The hope is precisely that these goals will catalyse and *coordinate* finance, policy, metrics, and action against the worst forms of poverty and environmental degradation.

Yet the image of the silent choir resurges. For just as the conductor’s motion did not necessarily have the power to bring in the choir, nor does the UN Secretary General, nor indeed any leader, have the power to deliver what it takes to confront extreme poverty,

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<sup>1</sup> ‘On love for the poor’

<sup>2</sup> R.T. France *The Gospel of Matthew* 2007.

<sup>3</sup> [Homily on the feast of Christ the King](#), 24 November, 2013.

hunger, Ebola, illiteracy, climate change, or other pressing needs. They can only do so insofar as people and groups come forward from all sides – from charismatic leaders to Ebola nurses, from elected government officials to head teachers to corporate lawyers; from UN ambassadors to philanthropists to lobbyists and negotiators, aye to students writing essays. Even so the Kingdom of God cannot fully come upon earth until it arises within us all.

As Christians, Matthew proposes, our response to the poor is our faith distilled. We can still serve the living Christ in the poorest of the poor and it is a joy and privilege, and a duty, to do so. This is not only for our own salvation, but so that like the choir we can be relied upon to ‘come in’ when Christ the King beckons, as voices and actors. This week, as the Christian year ends, we are invited to meditate on the presence of the living God to the ends of the cosmos and in the poorest of the poor. This week, we can ponder Gregory’s words: “Do you think that kindness to others is not a necessity for you?” This week, we can consider the interdependence between human institutions designed to coordinate and advance justice, and those persons whose hearts are ruled with kindness and wisdom, mercy and truth – as if by Christ. And, this week, the final week of the Christian year, we can reflect directly on our treatment of the least of these my brothers and sisters, and pray, that in the year to come, we may catch Christ’s cue and come in, at least from time to time.

I close with words from a sermon preached by St John Chrysostom when he was Archbishop of Constantinople:

Do you want to honor Christ’s body? Then do not scorn him in his nakedness, nor honor him here in the church with silken garments while neglecting him outside where he is cold and naked. For he who said: This is my body, and made it so by his words, also said: “... *inasmuch as you did .. it for one of these, the least of my brothers, you did .. it for me.*” (Matt. 25:34ff) - Sermon (L).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Found in *Post-Nicene Fathers Series 1 Volume 10*