



Sunday Reflection

Last Sunday after Pentecost

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 22 November 2020

Last week of Pentecost

Christ the King

Our God reigns, our God serves; through worship we reach out both to praise God's majesty and to receive God's wisdom, insight and strength, so that our lives might be offered in open, honest, loving service.

Reflection for this week's Gospel

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?”

Matthew 25.37

An Illustration to set the scene

The top rank of Great Western Railway (GWR) express locomotives was the class known as the “Kings”. The Swindon-based GWR pursued a policy of standardisation. It had many classes of locomotive with the same wheel arrangement as the Kings – 4-6-0 – sharing similar characteristics, including an elegant tapered boiler, copper-capped chimney and brass safety-valve cover. Across the classes



there were many interchangeable parts, as the Kings had developed from predecessors such as the Saints and Stars, Halls and Castles. To the uninitiated they were simply another smartly turned-out green engine, but to the GWR workforce they were monarchs of the line. Not only were Kings similar-looking to their compatriots, they also performed the same task; their finely tuned elegance was designed for a life of service, safely, swiftly and smoothly transporting passengers and occasionally goods across the country, every day between 1927 and 1962, when the steam era drew to a close.

Looking at the teaching of the Gospel

Jesus' final words in his last discourse of Matthew's Gospel incisively define what it means to have faith in him. Loving service, not confession, is the key, the type of sacrificial behaviour that he himself demonstrates in the chapters that follow, through his entry into Jerusalem, trial and death.

There is a tendency to allow the promise of punishment for those who fail in compassion to overshadow this passage. Concentrating on Christ's role as judge skews the vision of his coming in glory and depicts his kingship as a top-down, dictatorial paradigm that mirrors that of contemporary earthly rulers.

Matthew has drawn us into a vivid cosmic scenario, with the Son of Man enthroned in glory, surrounded by angels and in the presence of all the nations, so we certainly can't escape an element of judgement.

But then the focus shifts to individuals, especially the poorest, weakest, least respected, forgotten members of society. It is reminiscent of Luke's description of Jesus in his home town of Nazareth, preaching from Isaiah on freedom, healing and care for the outcast, or John's narration of Jesus kneeling on the floor

to wash his disciples' feet. The message is clear – loving service lies at the heart of this Messiah's rule. It starts at the bottom, with those whose struggles are greatest and whose ability to give in return is smallest.

While commanding heavenly authority, Christ's kingship bubbles up from below, from solidarity with those without power, dignity or representation – he is one with the stranger, those who are naked, hungry, sick or imprisoned. If themes of judgement are taken at face value, compassion is reduced to a general humanitarian ethic or to taking one course of action because it triggers a reward. Such an approach is diametrically opposed to Jesus' intentions – to see him in the stranger is not to reduce people to faceless ciphers for our own ends; rather, it is to perceive each person as a unique self with their individual and distinctive personhood, to care for and love them as we would care for and love ourselves.

It is on this, not on confession of faith, justification, grace or forgiveness of sins, that we shall be judged.

How can we reflect on the application to our lives?

GWR King class locomotives were developed out of a roster of engines with which they shared many vital characteristics, to offer a substantial level of public service for over forty years.

Similarly, our mission is to put concrete loving service at the heart of all we do, but not in an abstract sense; not simply tithing to good causes or following a well-worn template, but by equipping each of us with the skills, confidence and insight to reach out to those who are disadvantaged, outcast, alien, troubled; to see the individual beyond the problem so that we can help and care thoughtfully and appropriately.

We are called to treat every person as important and precious. If this behaviour marks us out from society then perhaps we are on the right track.

It was such selfless conduct, looking out for each other within the community and behaving charitably towards those in need, that marked out the early Church as distinctive from the surrounding culture, and which became a significant factor in its survival and growth.

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?”

Matthew 25.37

Please share your response to this reflection to Rector@SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk – did anything speak to you? Did you feel challenged, angered, consoled by something in the words? How did God’ spirit move you as you read it? Have you shared the words with someone else? Is this a worthwhile thing to make available to folk whilst we cannot meet for corporate worship to share in word and sacrament? What are your thoughts?

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