

**“FOLLOWING THE KING – 79”**

*Matthew 25:31-46*

In the tradition in which I was brought up, there would be people who seemed to have committed their life to Jesus, but who would at some point perhaps drift away from church and all that kind of thing. Those who were still sticking to their faith would then say of the “backsliders”, “Well, they obviously weren’t properly saved.” The implication was that maybe these people had not ticked the right doctrinal boxes or not said the right words in the right order at some point. This passage that we’ve read this morning, though, makes it very clear that there’s a good deal more to “being saved” than putting your hand up and saying a prayer of commitment. It’s a very scary passage in some ways because in it Jesus not only points out quite plainly that his followers need to be putting their faith into practice, but also tells us that there could be dire consequences if they don’t.

This is the end of Jesus’ formal teaching in Matthew’s Gospel. We’ve reached the end of his final discourse, the fifth and final section of straight teaching. At the beginning of the next chapter (which we’ll pick up on again after the Christmas season has come and gone) we are into the Passion narrative, the story of Jesus’ final days before his execution on the cross. In that part of the story there’s just a couple of short things that he says in Bethany and in Jerusalem, but this here is the conclusion, the climax of his teaching about the Kingdom of God.

We’ve been looking at the way in which Jesus describes this Kingdom all the way through this Gospel. It is, you may recall, a Kingdom which is not really geographical, but where the benevolent sovereign rule of God runs. It was talked about by the Hebrew prophets and there are plenty of passages in the Old Testament where we are granted a vision of what this Kingdom might eventually look like as God restores and renews the creation – which he originally describes as good, but which has become perverted and distorted by the presence of sin and evil within it. Jesus has come to inaugurate that Kingdom and through his death, resurrection and glorification (as we shall see in the last chapters of this Gospel) he will make possible its final consummation. That will occur when he returns to earth for a final time and when, in the words of *Revelation 21:1-5*, heaven and earth become one and humanity can once again live with God:

*Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! **God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.**”*

God will be with us as the ruler of all, his broken creation will be fixed and we will have a part to play in it as followers of the Kingly Messiah – Jesus says to those who stand before him, “*Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world’*” (v34).

Now, all of that is bound up in “being saved”. We are not “saved” just to go to heaven, like some kind of personal eternal life assurance policy. We are saved from the brokenness of this world – and the part we have played in that – and we are called to join Jesus in proclaiming the Good News that this is not all there is – there is real hope for the future, there is something beyond the existence which we have here and now with all its pain and tears and fears and limitations, and lack of fulfilment and satisfaction. The resurrection of Jesus proves that.

In the last couple of chapters Jesus has told stories to try and show what the Kingdom will be like. Throughout his teaching and preaching he has been giving hints about it. And for those who haven’t quite grasped that, he has shown in his own life glimpses of what the Kingdom will mean for people. He has offered hope to the hopeless, love to the unloved, dignity to the downtrodden, healing to the hurt and the suffering, and joy to the despairing. We’ve read about that in the reports of his miracles and signs and wonders – miracles that have affected not only humans but also creation itself. And as all this has been happening he has been calling people to get involved, to join him in this project. Being a part of all this is what the Kingdom is about for us – and what “being saved” includes. It’s showing what a healed broken world could be like – helping the hungry, welcoming the stranger, visiting the prisoner and so on.

Just one brief aside at this point. Jesus talks here about doing these things for “*the least of these brothers of mine*” and there’s a bit of debate about who he means here. Are these just other disciples of his? After all he does sometimes refer to his disciples as “brothers”. Or is he referring to all people? If we take the title “*Son of Man*” here as having some kind of reference to all humanity, then we could see these “*brothers*” as other people generally. And later on, in v45, he does use a more general term (“*these*”). There are compelling arguments on both sides, which I won’t go into this morning, but I tend to go for the view that Jesus is talking about helping everyone, not just other Christians. That’s partly because of the various arguments, but also I think I’d rather err on that side of things and not find I’ve got it wrong at the final call! And after all, Jesus himself did help everyone, not just those who committed themselves to following him.

But even if we take this as reaching out to all people in need whenever we come across them, Jesus still isn’t setting the bar terribly high here. This is not something only a select few can do. We are all capable of reaching out with compassion and care to anyone who is in need, even if only by offering them a glass

of water or a sandwich. And it's what Jesus expects of us as his followers. This is what it means to be "properly saved", to share the grace and the love of God with all whom we meet. This is, as Lawrence Moore, one of the mission directors at the URC, puts it, integral to but not exhaustive of salvation: without this the Gospel is truncated. What he means is that being saved does indeed mean that we believe in Jesus, that we have committed ourselves to following him – belief and faith are fundamental to our salvation – but this is a fundamental aspect of it too. You cannot claim to be a follower of Jesus Christ, the Kingly Messiah, if you aren't living out your commitment to him by helping others.

Of course, we are all free to live exactly as we want to – that's part of the God-given freedom that we have as human beings created in his image – but we are all also accountable for how we have exercised that freedom. There will be a final reckoning, a last judgement – we've seen that in the stories that Jesus has been telling in the couple of chapters leading up to this. Jesus is coming back – and we are reminded of that as we observe Advent: his first coming presupposes his final coming. Over the past few weeks we have recognised the **inevitability** of his return. But Jesus has also stressed the **unpredictability** of his return. We cannot tell exactly when he is going to come back, so we need to be living out his commission at all times.

So in these final few paragraphs of Jesus' earthly teaching to his followers he is effectively saying, "Are you with me or not?" If you are, this is how you should be living out your commitment to me, doing these things as a matter of course. The "*sheep*", "*the righteous*", have been doing all this anyway: they are surprised when Jesus commends them for it (v37). If you are not doing these things, then you are not serious about the Kingdom. As Jesus' brother James wrote in his Letter later in the New Testament, "*faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead*" (James 2:17,26). So those who are accepted into this final, consummated Kingdom of God – and not consigned to an eternity with the ruler they have chosen by default, the devil – are judged not only on their knowledge, their doctrinal understanding and so on, but on what they have actually done to live out the values of the Kingdom here and now, on the ways in which they have offered others glimpses of that Kingdom in their lives.

Now that has implications for us not only as individual followers of Jesus, but also as a congregation of disciples. What are we doing as a church to express these values? Reaching out to others with the truth of the Gospel, preaching, talking about Jesus, sharing our faith in words is all part of that. But we are also called to be reaching out to those in need through our actions and activities. In a society, a community which is just as needy as it's ever been, how is this church expressing its response to these words of Jesus? There are some folk who have been thinking very hard about this recently as Jesus has spoken to them by his Holy Spirit and we need also to be praying hard about what we actually do in

practice to make this kind of Kingdom action a reality. It was part of what we spoke about as Elders at our most recent awayday and we'll share a bit about that at the next Church Meeting.

In the meantime, we must not forget that Jesus calls us to be lights for the world, as we have been thinking on this Advent Sunday. Jesus came to be the Light of the World himself and he calls those who follow him to reflect that light into the places where it is currently very dark. Are you up for that? It's your decision, of course, but don't forget that one day you will indeed be held accountable for that decision. Ask for the strength of God's Holy Spirit to be able live as Jesus calls you to.

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We are not "saved" just to go to heaven, but saved from the brokenness of this world – and the part we have played in that – and called to join Jesus in proclaiming the Good News that this is not all there is. Throughout his teaching and preaching he has been giving hints about it. And for those who haven't quite grasped that, he has shown in his own life glimpses of what the Kingdom will mean for people. Being a part of all this is what the Kingdom is about for us – and what "being saved" includes. It's showing what a healed broken world could be like – helping the hungry, welcoming the stranger, visiting the prisoner and so on.

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### **Questions for discussion**

1. What do you understand by "being saved"? Saved from what? Saved for what?
2. What do you think Jesus means when he say to his followers "*take your inheritance*" in v34?
3. Who are "*the least of these brothers of mine*" (v40) – Jesus' disciples or all people? How does that affect your understanding of this passage?
4. Is Jesus speaking literally in v41? Why/why not?
5. How might this passage affect our mission as a church? What could we do to live it out together?