

Christ the King 2020

Matthew 25.31-46

Fr Peter Groves

Were today not a Sunday, we would be celebrating the Feast of St Cecilia, patron saint of musicians. Each year on her feast day I pay particular attention to our chantry list, that is the list of those whose anniversaries of death we mark on each individual day, because it contains a notable name. You will hear it shortly. Clive Lewis. This is of course Clive Staples Lewis the celebrated scholar and writer known to the world as C.S. Lewis, whose passing on 22nd November 1963 was rather overshadowed by the assassination of John F Kennedy on the same day.

Lewis was not an Anglo-Catholic, but he knew St Mary Magdalen's well and the parish had a central role at

the end of his life. Knowing that Lewis's time was near, the Warden of Keble, Austin Farrer, sought a priest to administer the last rites. Then, as now I hope, Mary Mags was a safe port of call if one needed a priest who knew what he was doing, and so Farrer telephoned the Vicarage. Fr Michael Ward, who was Precentor of Christ Church and honorary curate in our parish, travelled up to Headington Quarry and ensured that this particular faithful Christian passed on in the strength of God's sacramental grace. Lewis died fifty-seven years ago today.

Lewis has been much on my mind this week, not just because of the coincidence of dates. It's a constant complaint of mine that Lewis is remembered more for his Christian apologetics – of which I don't think very highly – than for his literary scholarship, which was remarkable. My first year students have just written an essay on the role of the Son of God in Milton, an essay for which they prepare by reading, among much else, Lewis's work "A Preface to Paradise Lost", which

remains one of the most theologically sophisticated examples of literary criticism ever written. At the same time, at our bedtime reading, Edward and I are now on the fifth of the Narnia books, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. And despite enjoying the book I am wondering again, as I do with each Narnia book we enjoy together, how anyone can possibly think Aslan a good representation of Jesus Christ. I know I am in the minority here, indeed in Oxford I am probably thought a heretic, but supposedly Christ-like lion is such a moralistic and judgemental prig, whose boarding school approach to morality and virtue seems more fitting in a small minded Edwardian headmaster than it does in an intended redeemer figure. The obsession with good behaviour, and the judgement which ensues when it is lacking, belongs in an account of Christianity which I simply do not recognise.

And yet judgement can not be escaped or ignored in Christian thinking. And as a wise colleague who knows much more about Lewis than I do pointed out,

his books represent an understanding of Christianity which was, and is, extremely common in English religion. But we do need to be careful in the ways in which we talk about judgement, and one of the dangers it is most important to avoid is the assumption that God's judgement is anything like yours or mine.

The gospel we heard this morning is perhaps the most famous narrative representation of the judgement of God. Indeed, the story Jesus tells of the sheep and the goats is the basis for the great Christian representations of the Last Judgement. At the right hand of Christ, always in the centre, we will find the righteous being welcomed into heaven. At his left hand, the demonic figures will be dragging the damned down to their eternal punishment. Whilst we may not share the view of former times that the everlasting fires of a physical hell await those who are lost, we should nevertheless be alarmed by the stark character

of this story. If we have treated the brethren of Jesus well, we will be OK. But if we have not, separation and the absence of Christ are what awaits us.

But Matthew does not finish at the end of this chapter. On the contrary, the end of this chapter runs straight into the beginning of the passion narrative. In other words, Matthew has deliberately placed this parable of judgement right up against the events of Jesus betrayal, torture and death. This dramatic and alarming tale is the third of three consecutive parables of coming crisis: the wise and foolish bridesmaids, the parable of the talents, and now those divided before the throne of glory, as a shepherd divides sheep from goats. And while the image of being placed either on the right or on the left, destined either for glory or annihilation, speaks uncomfortably to us, we reduce it almost to a morality tale if we fail to understand what follows.

When this story is told, the gospel's theme of judgement is coming to its climactic conclusion. The act of judgement which will make sense of everything Matthew has been showing us, is about to take place. And rather than sheep and goats, it is the shepherd who will be judged, judged by the very people over whom he ought to have authority. Judas will judge Jesus as a failure worthy of betrayal; the disciples will judge him as a rebel to be defended by violence; the high priestly class will judge him as a danger to their society and its religious polity; and the occupying imperial power will judge him as a threat to be publicly disposed of. The judgement which is coming is the betrayal, arrest, condemnation, torture and crucifixion of the Son of God, and the throne of glory on which this particular King will sit is nothing other than the instrument of his execution. The cross from which he hangs is the throne from which he reigns. As one great theologian put it, Jesus is the judge judged in our place.

Divine judgement is, then, topsy turvy. The judgement of God appears to be first upon and against his own self, despite the innocence of the victim. The condemnation is not God's of course. This is not a matter of crude substitution, in which God punishes Jesus for what others have done. On the contrary, God in the person of Jesus submits to the condemnation and punishment of humanity in order to subsume and to transform the violence of human judgement with the infinite power of his love. The glory of Christ the King is not the glory of earthly rulers, it is the agony and death which love itself undergoes at the hands of human fear and hatred.

What it means to be judged by God is to be united with the crucified Christ. But the crucified Christ is the one whose kingdom is manifest in life and not in death. On the third day the ultimate reality of Christian judgement will burst forth – love cannot be contained, death is not the final word, violence cannot overcome the depth of the divine compassion. And so the Christian is called to respond, called to service and to

love of neighbour, called to feed the hungry and visit the sick and tend to those in need as the brothers and sisters of Christ. But that call is lived out in the knowledge of Christ's true judgement, the judgement which promises love first and last and above all things. And love is not very much like good behaviour.