



*Compassion means
full immersion
in the human condition.*

—Henri Nouwen

REIGN OF CHRIST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST 22 NOVEMBER 2020

Opening Sentences—Psalm 100

Know that the LORD is God.

It is God who made us, and we belong to God;
We are God's people, the sheep of God's pasture.

Opening Prayer

Your kingdom, O God, is justice and peace
and joy in the Holy Spirit.

It is for these gifts that I long, and so I pray:

Come, Lord, and open in me the gates of your kingdom.

When my heart is weary and downcast,
when I allow the voices of discontentment to rule:

Come, Lord, and open in me the gates of your kingdom.

For those who are impoverished body and soul,
for the injustices that reign and cause suffering
around the world and in our land:

Come, Lord, and open in me the gates of your kingdom.

Awake to my deep desire for love in the world
and confident of your mercy, I pray:

Come, Lord, and open in me the gates of your kingdom.

Amen

Scripture Reading—Matthew 25:31–46

All religions hold the view that we are to care for those who are poor. For example:

Buddhism teaches an action called Dana which includes sharing and selfless giving without anticipation of return or benefit to the giver.

The third pillar in Islam is Zakat which is compulsory giving to those in need as a way of purifying one's self.

Judaism includes the obligation to perform charitable works known as tzedakah. The prophets speak often about God's desire for compassion and justice as a measure of faith.

So, in some ways, the parable of the sheep and the goats is not exceptional. But as is the nature of parables, there is an element of surprise within it. The parable goes beyond expectations of charity and comes closer to expressing something like the sentiment of Dorothy Day, "Those who cannot see Christ in the poor are atheists indeed." What a fitting witness and challenge to contemplate on Reign of Christ Sunday.

So, with this in mind, after reading the parable, you might ask:

What has been revealed to me about the nature of God and the realm of Christ?

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'

And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Going Deeper

At the beginning of 2020, Jane Christiansen gave me a book of stories from Orange Sky volunteers—an organisation with whom she and Rob had given their time in recent years. I read the book from cover to cover one Sunday afternoon during our first lockdown and found it to be a moving, worshipful experience. I highly recommend it.

Orange Sky is a mobile laundry service begun by then twenty-year old Brisbane mates Nic Marchesi and Lucas Patchett. The introduction to the book offers this statement of mission:

There is no doubt that clean clothes make all of us feel better about ourselves. But the majority impact of Orange Sky doesn't rely on washers spinning and dryers tumbling. Yes, there's laundry to do, but more importantly, there's conversation to be had. To date, Orange Sky volunteers have fostered over 100,000 hours of conversation. They focus on creating a safe, positive and supportive community for people who are too often ignored or shunned.

As I read the stories from volunteers, I recognised something of our experience as we seek to be Christian community in the heart of Glenelg. There is much laughter, joy and delightful connections. It is wonderful to see people interacting, forging supportive friendships, resourcing one another and generating a sense of belonging. Like any community, sometimes there is frustration, anger, disagreement and pain. We feel the heartbreak of our limitations. We walk alongside each other as we take three steps forward and two steps back, imprisoned as we are by past trauma, addictions, suffering and illnesses of all kinds.

But the surprise element in the parable is the presence of Christ in our tender love and service. Perhaps you noticed that *both* the sheep and the goats asked, “Lord, when... when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or in prison?” Might the parable be introducing a new element in what is a fairly universal encouragement to care for those who are poor? Might the “majority impact,” as Orange Sky puts it, be something other than do-good-ism and social obligation?

The reset brought on by 2020 has given us time to reflect, to think deeply about what we are called to be and do. At the induction of volunteers now, there is a shared agreement that a significant part of our work is to look for that which is of God in all people. Our conscious awareness of this intention has the potential to make a big difference not only in how we deliver our service but in the sacred encounters we have while serving.

Henri Nouwen in his book *The Way of the Heart* writes:

Let us not underestimate how hard it is to be compassionate. Compassion is hard because it requires the inner disposition to go with others to places where they are weak, vulnerable, lonely, and broken. But this is not our spontaneous response to suffering. What we desire most is to do away with suffering by fleeing from it or finding a quick cure for it. Compassion means full immersion in the human condition.

Furthermore, what we discover in this full immersion is that the poverty is not just in the other but is in us as well. This is often the hardest part for us to absorb, but it holds the greatest possibility for conversion. Each of us has vulnerabilities, weaknesses and points of suffering. We may not always be aware of them. We may choose to reject, hide or even ignore them. But they are there. Our recognition and acceptance of our own vulnerability is what makes genuine love possible. Otherwise we risk acting upon others only from places of seeming strength. Not only does this reinforce the chasm between “haves” and “have nots,” “those with power” and “victims,” but it misses opportunities for encountering Christ who is in all and through all.

Fulfilling the imperative to care for those who are poor, then, has the possibility of being more than the easing of suffering or a simple material exchange. When we draw near to one another, especially those who appear to be obviously in need, there is the potential for mutual healing and enrichment of spirit. I have seen this often at St. Andrew’s in 2020 and know it to be true in my own experience. So, may the calling to be, as the psalmist says, “the sheep of God’s pasture” be the guide for our priorities and efforts as a community now and into the future.

Some questions for reflection:

- When have you stayed close to vulnerability in another? What was this experience like for you? What gifts were revealed?
- What makes it challenging to stay present to suffering, yours or that of another?



Image: *Christ in the Breadline* by Fritz Eichenberg

Fritz Eichenberg was born in 1901 to a Jewish family in Cologne, Germany. The rise of Adolf Hitler convinced him to move his family to New York. Raised in a non-religious family, he joined the Quakers following the untimely death of his wife in 1937 and was associated with Catholic charity work through his friendship with Dorothy Day.

- The Quaker Society rests on the view of the Inner Light or “that of God in everyone.” In what ways do you see Eichenberg’s image reflecting this view?
- How might the idea of a universal Inner Light and Eichenberg’s image give shape to your identity as a sheep in God’s pasture?

Prayer of Response—from *Dirt, Mess and Danger*, Iona Community

It is hard to keep on following you, Jesus.
It is difficult to be faithful,
for you have this annoying habit
of stopping in all the wrong places,
all the distasteful places,
all the awkward and bothersome places
were we would rather not be.
But we know it is the powerless who
capture your attention
and the hungry
who are closest to your heart.

Where dirt and danger are present,
you are right there too.
Where selfishness and greed
make a mess of things,
you are in the middle of it,
pleading for compassion and mercy.
Where poverty and desperation
give birth to even more misery,
you are there, suffering with your people,
experiencing the ache
and the pain of hunger
and the worry and the fear
of having next to nothing.

And when those who are strong
go with you to those places
we would rather not be;
when we stir ourselves from apathy,
and make the effort to shout 'No!';
when we respond to the impulse
to demand 'Why?';
and have the courage to protest
'This is not fair!';
then there is where the love
of heaven is seen
in all its wonderful compassion.

You gave us a vision of your kingdom.
You have spoken about a mustard seed
growing into decency and fairness;
salt bringing out the true flavour
of what living means;
yeast that stands for truth
which conquers evil;
love which transforms earth's people.
May we hold to these visions
of your kingdom,
and do what we can to realise
your great dream.

Blessing—From Pilgrim Uniting Church worship resources

May the Christ who walks on wounded feet
walk with you on the road.

May the Christ who serves with wounded hands
stretch out your hands to serve.

May the Christ who loves with a wounded heart
open your hearts to love.

May you see the face of Christ in ev'ryone you meet,
And may ev'ryone you meet see the face of Christ in you.

Amen.