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Introduction

None of the Gaelic languages (Irish, Scots Gaelic, Manx or Caint) have direct words for “Yes” or “No”. In those languages, the concepts of agreement or disagreement don’t exist in a theoretical sense. If someone says “Are you going to help me?” you have to say “I am” or, “I am not”.

“Are you a person of prayer?” I am.
“Are you going to visit me in prison?” I am not.
“Are you going to feed me when I am hungry?”

What’s the answer?

Jesus words in this week’s lectionary text lead us to reflect on how we can be the answer, rather than just say the answer. It is a text that does not have time for abstractions. It wants actions. And this, in the gospel text, is a way of living into the kingdom of which Jesus is the King. It is not, on this feast of the reign of Christ, some dominance–system that has overlords and peasants and prince and pomp. It is something that demonstrates value by the quality of relationship that we maintain and human connection at points of need.

Text

Matt. 25:31–46

“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.”

Comment

This text is towards the end of Matthew’s gospel. It can be read in a way of sectarianism: there are good people and there are bad people — but that, I think, misses the point of it.

The gospel of Matthew has a very high opinion of being called. In this gospel, moreso than the others, the portrayal of the disciples is quite sympathetic. While they make mistakes and misunderstand, they are nonetheless still gathered together and blessed and sent out as missionaries. In Mark’s original ending, the final word of the gospel speaks of the disciples “and they were afraid”. In Matthew’s gospel there is a high theology of calling. To be called is to be blessed, to be chosen, to be made into some new priesthood, some new sense of inherent, even ontological, vocation.

So it is into this context of a gospel that has a high understanding of people in Christian leadership being chosen that this warning text comes. It is not about there being good people and bad people. It is a warning to those upon whom great power is being conferred to be aware that the economy they are about to trade in is not an economy of wealth, or an economy of princeliness, or an economy of separateness. It is, rather, an economy where your calling is shown in your actions: Did you stand with the poor? Did your love of your enemy show through? Did you pray for those who persecuted you? Did you visit those in prison, or those isolated through abusive powers of others? Did you withhold apology? Did you refuse to repent? Were you addicted to your own ego? Did you hold back your solidarity because you were worried about your reputation? Did you speak words of hostility? Did you welcome the stranger?

The setting of the text is dramatic. Matthew begins by describing Glory and Nations and Thrones and Angels and Multitudes being gathered. It sounds like a grand display of pomp, military ceremony, magnificence. But instead, in the midst of this grandiose setting, the concerns of the vulnerable are raised and the vulnerable’s stories are the ones by which the stories of the chosen are judged.

This text is a challenge to all of us who follow the way of Christianity to examine our actions and impact in the light of those who are affected our power.

For the feast of Christ the king, it is an appropriate text because it demonstrates the way in which language of monarchy is redefined by the gospels. The language of monarchy that is depicted in here is not one of entitlement, but one of solidarity.

While some prefer to modify the language of kingdom — because their own experience of being under empire has been too painful — it is true that the gospel of Matthew uses it over and over. But for Matthew, kingdom is a place where something bigger than political power is operational. Matthew’s gospel proclaims a kingdom where power rests on demonstrated truths, and where truth can be uncovered at every moment — in the moment where a prisoner is beaten, in the moment where large scale power games are being played at the expense of the most vulnerable, in the moment where an individual’s life is at stake for the sake of larger political agendas.

For Matthew, there is both the delight of love — shown through the call and inclusion of the disciples, and the demands of love — shown through the requirement of the disciples to follow in of way of Jesus who was at one with those suffering under imperial power.

Response

There are so many stories of need surrounding us. If a congregation, or a home group, or a community of friends can begin telling stories of how it is that people stood with them in their time of need, it may be that people begin to realise the power and possibility of doing so in the stories of need in the lives that surround us.

Prayer

Jesus,
Lord of prisons,
sickbeds and empty plates.
You spoke much, words and sermons
and demands and praise.
But even you were wary of words only.
Lead us to be people whose words
lead us into action.
Because you are the Word of God
and you were not content with
words only.
Amen.