

All Saints King's Heath – 26 November 2017 (Christ the King – Year A)

(Matthew 25:31-end: Ephesians 1:14-end)

If you visit the old cathedral in Lübeck in the north of Germany, you will see a great screen between the nave and the old choir of the church. But what will catch your attention is the great rood above the screen – Christ on his cross, with Mary and John on either side beneath him, as well as Adam and Eve, Mary Magdalene and a bishop. That rood has survived because of the bravery of firemen on the night in April 1942 when the city of Lübeck was bombed by the Royal Air Force. Revenge for Coventry. Half of the old city was destroyed as well as all but one of the city's ancient churches. (In the morning, amid the smoking ruins, my wife's grandfather took his youngest daughter to be confirmed in the one surviving church. It was Palm Sunday.)

All the ruined churches were rebuilt after the war. In the cathedral the scorched and blackened rood has been splendidly restored – a crucified Christ who has come through the fires of human destruction. Christ the crucified and triumphant king.

Before the Reformation took them all away, there were roods like that in every church in England – Christ the king raised up on his cross for all to see as they came into the church, with Mary and John beside him – an embodiment of Jesus' own words: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."¹

Also, if there was space enough on the wall above the chancel arch, there was often a picture painted on the wall, the scene from today's Gospel – the Son of Man on his throne, Christ the judge of all. On his right hand side were those to whom he says, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." On the left, those to whom he says those terrible words, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels."

Take these two pictures together – Christ raised up on his cross and Christ raised up on his throne – and what are they saying? The judge and the crucified are one. The

¹ John 12:32

one who was placarded and mocked as “Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews” - he is now revealed as King of kings and Lord of lords the judge of all nations. The cross is in fact the point of judgement. On the day of judgement, as we shall be singing in the words of Charles Wesley’s great Advent hymn, “every eye shall now behold him, clothed in dreadful majesty.” And “those who set at nought and sold him, pierced and nailed him to the tree,” will see what they had been doing. The cross is the place where the glory of Christ is both hidden and revealed.

In St John’s Gospel this is made absolutely clear. As the day of his suffering and death approaches, Jesus says: “Now is the Son of Man glorified” and “Now is the judgement of this world, now the ruler of this world will be driven out.”²

Matthew says the same, by the way he arranges his material. During the past three Sundays, finishing today, we have been hearing the three parables of Jesus that come immediately before Matthew’s account of the Lord’s passion. First there was Jesus’ story about the wise and foolish bridesmaids. Then came the story about the master who returns from his travels to find out what his servants have done with the money he left with them to look after. Finally, there is today’s story of the Son of Man on his glorious throne sorting out the sheep from the goats.

In each of these stories Jesus is pointing to the coming crisis. Who will get into the banquet? Who will have done what with the gifts his Lord has given him? Who will be welcomed into the kingdom of heaven, and who will have shut themselves out?

The answers lie in the events that are about to unfold. That is why, as the words of today’s Gospel reading fade away, Matthew plunges straight into the story of the Lord’s passion. As soon as Jesus finishes speaking, Matthew says: “When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, ‘You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified’.”³ Straightaway Caiaphas and his colleagues start planning how to arrest and kill Jesus. The judgement is coming, and it is coming now.

² John 13:31; 12:31

³ Matthew 26:1f.

How do we come to be judged by the crucified Jesus? Jesus has said it: “Whoever will acknowledge me before others, I too will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; and whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven.” Acknowledging him, he also says, is not just a matter of saying “Lord, Lord,” but of doing the will of his Father in heaven.⁴ And what is the will of his Father in heaven? It is that we should love God with all our heart, and our neighbours as ourselves.

The startling thing about today’s story is the astonishment of those who have been doing God’s will. “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? When did we see you as a stranger or an immigrant? When did we see you as poor or homeless, as sick or in prison?” So far they had been aware, they had not been responding to Jesus. They had simply been responding to their fellow women and men in their need.

Of course it matters how we respond to the words of Jesus. But what he is talking about here is how we respond to him when he meets us incognito, in the common humanity that he has shared. How have we responded to our fellow human beings in their hunger and thirst, in their rejection and their poverty? Whether we have recognized Jesus in them doesn’t really matter. What will matter is: have we recognized our common humanity? Have we recognized our faces in theirs? Or have we turned our backs on them?

What the Bible teaches us, especially if we listen to the prophets of the Old Testament, is that these are just as much questions for communities and societies as they are for individuals. If individuals can condemn themselves to self-destruction by turning their backs on their neighbours, so too can societies.

“Love your neighbour as yourself.” It’s the easiest thing, and it’s the hardest thing. Easy, because we don’t have to look for neighbours. They are all around us. In a city or country like ours we meet the poor, the stranger, the stranger every day. And if we don’t see them, it’s because we have turned our backs on them or shut ourselves up in the gated compounds of our minds. So it’s easy: God gives us neighbours every day.

⁴ Matthew 10:33; 7:21

But it's also hard, very hard. So hard that, when humankind was faced with Jesus in his thirst, his loneliness, his rejection and exclusion, humankind turned away and abandoned him. And humankind is still turning away. He is suffering still in the bodies and spirits of those whose humanity he has shared. He is suffering still in human poverty, in human homelessness, in human rejection. In a poor man or woman, we meet the poor Jesus. In someone who has been rejected or excluded, we meet the rejected Jesus. It is hard to look and act and not turn away. But their pain is the Lord's pain.

So how are we to do what the Lord asks of us? This is where St Paul can help us. In our second reading he was telling us about God's power in raising Jesus from the dead and seating him at his right hand, far above all rule and authority in heaven and on earth. Paul says that this same power that raised Jesus from the dead is also there for us. The Christ who is Lord of all is present here on earth in the body of which we are members. That is Paul's message.

So the power of God can work in us to raise us up and set us free from the death of our fears and self-absorption, so as to open our hearts to respond to our brothers and sisters. Whether we recognize his face in theirs or not, Christ can set us free to see our own faces in the faces of our own brothers and sisters. The way we respond to those we do see will reveal our response to the Lord we do not see. If we acknowledge our own flesh and blood in our rejected neighbour, the Lord who was rejected will also acknowledge us. The judge and the crucified are one.

We started with the figure of Christ raised high on his cross, which used to stand in all our churches, and with the picture of Christ the judge of all which so often stood above it. Well, we have it all here at All Saints in the cross above our chancel screen.

First of all, there is the cross raised up for us all to gaze on as we come into church. But there is more there than a simple cross. At the centre of the cross is the Lamb, the Lamb crucified and risen, the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne of God, surrounded by the four living creatures, one like a lion, one like an ox, one with a human face, and one like a flying eagle. Day and night, we are told, they sing without

ceasing: “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God almighty, who was, and is, and is to come!” And that is the song we sing with them every time we are called to the supper of the Lamb: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts! Heaven and earth are full of his glory!”⁵

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and riches, wisdom and might, honour and glory and praise!”⁶ Amen.

⁵ Revelation 4:8

⁶ Revelation 5:12