

Sermon given on 22 November 2020 on Matthew chapter 25:31 to 46 and Ezekiel 34:11 to 16 and 20 to 24. Recorded at St Michael's church Sandhurst.

Today we celebrate Christ the King, and I'm preaching on Matthew Chapter 25, which refers to Christ's second coming with all the angels of heaven who also accompanied him at his first coming, see Luke 2 verse 13.

Jesus isn't coming the second time as a humble baby, but as a king; this time he will come in strength, power and glory, this time he comes with the authority of a king, and this time all the people on earth will stand before him in humility.

I remember the celebrations at the end of the Second World War, my grandfather had hundreds of union jacks which he put up in the same way that some people put up Christmas decorations these days in their front gardens, the outside of his house was festooned with flags.

We had a street party cum sports day to celebrate VE day, but I have to confess I cannot remember very much of that, except that we had a local police inspector in our village, and he had a dog called patch who ran up behind him, and with a combination of jumping and climbing, climbed up onto his shoulders and started barking his head off in triumph.

Whatever great event stands out in your memory, whatever it is, when Christ the King comes that will put everything else, no matter how memorable, in the shade, because the whole world will know of this event, and some people will be overwhelmed with joy while others will be overwhelmed with grief.

Why will some be glad, and the others grief stricken, because Christ will separate us into two groups, one he will call sheep the other he will call goats.

The sheep, who are the righteous verse 46, will be those who he will save to eternal life, while the goats will be cast to eternal punishment.

So who will be saved; Jesus tells us that it will be those who fed the hungry, and gave a drink to the thirsty, those who welcomed the stranger, and clothed the naked, those who ministered to the sick, and those who visited people in prison.

And those who will not be saved are those who did not feed the hungry or give them something to drink. Those who did not welcome strangers or clothe the naked, and those who did not care for the sick or visit people in prison.

Now this is quite a different set of rules, indeed the response of both camps is one of surprise verse 37 for example reads, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?" They were surprised at his statement.

They were surprised because the normal rule that we hear time and time again is that those who will be saved are those who have faith and trust in the risen Christ; so why didn't Jesus just say that those who have faith and trust in me will be the sheep that will be saved, and those who do not will be the goats.

But what does faith and trust in Jesus mean? To understand what it means to have faith in Jesus, we must first understand the nature of faith itself. Faith contains three elements: knowledge, assent, and trust.

Firstly knowledge, faith must have content, there must be something or someone to have faith in. To say to someone, "have faith", is meaningless until we know in what or in who we are to have faith. I wouldn't go in an aeroplane if I didn't have faith that it could actually fly.

To have faith in Jesus as our saviour we must first know that he is the Christ the Son of God who came to earth to save his people from sin, John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

It is in the gospels that the life and nature of Jesus is explained to us, and if we don't know the gospels we will not know that it is only Jesus the Son of God who can save us, so we must read the Bible or have it read to us, and explained to us continually until we know beyond doubt that it is Jesus who is our saviour.

Secondly assent, that means we must accept that the message of the Gospels is true, that our knowledge of Jesus is true.

That's why we preach and why house groups are so essential, because we need to arrive at a point where we know in our hearts that the gospels are true, that we do know the real Jesus intimately and that he is our saviour.

And finally trust; to have faith in Jesus means to trust and rely on him. Those who have faith in Jesus rely on him as their saviour. St. Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans 10:9, "Because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

To trust in Jesus means to believe that his death was accepted by God as payment in full for our guilt and sin.

Now the origin of the phrase "Scapegoat" came from the Jewish practice of laying hands on the head of a goat and thereby transferring all their sins on to the goat then at the same time killing the goat, and it was in the killing of the goat that their sins died with the animal, that was the whole purpose of sin sacrifices, but it had to be repeated time and time again.

But now, if we turn to Christ in repentance, and believe and trust in him, then our sins will be covered by the sacrifice that Jesus made once and for all on the cross for the sins of the whole world, which clearly includes us, then we will not die but have eternal life with him.

So, at a very basic level those who are new to the Christian faith, who repent of their sins, and who believe and trust in the risen Christ will be saved.

But as we become more mature in our faith, as our understanding of what faith in Jesus means increases, so we begin to understand that with faith in Jesus comes responsibilities towards other people, which is precisely what Jesus was saying in our reading from Matthew's gospel.

St James in his letter to all Christians at chapter 2 starting at verse 14 wrote these words, "What good is it, my brothers, if a man says he has faith but has no works? Can his faith save him?"

"If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So, faith by itself if it has no works, is dead".

We are to help people in the simple things such as giving a hungry person a meal, or a thirsty person a drink, welcoming a stranger into our community, visiting the sick and cheering them up, visiting prisoners and giving them hope for the future.

These are things which anyone can do, giving simple help and spending some time helping other people who are in need.

Here at St Michael's for instance we collect food for the local food bank, and many people when they go and do their weekly shop, buy a little extra for the food bank which they bring to church on Sunday, and some people donate money through the Crowthorne food bank web site.

A simple act which brings relief to lots of people in our own community. And the members of the Coop also donate food locally and many people in Sandhurst are members of the Coop.

But we must be clear about the order of things. Salvation comes through faith and trust in the risen Christ, it cannot be earned through good works.

If our priorities have really been me, me, me all our lives and we suddenly think I need to go out and do something for other people or I'll not get to heaven, and we now devote the rest of our lives to helping other people, we may yet be disappointed.

We may be disappointed because salvation is a free gift to those who truly believe and trust in Jesus Christ, we do not have to work for our salvation, because we will know that it comes to us through faith, so through faith we can relax because we are saved.

But it is then, that we realise that with faith comes responsibilities, responsibilities to God, and we can only exercise our responsibilities to God by helping his people.

It is this work that we do, not for our salvation, because that comes through faith, but because we know that God wants us to be his disciples and spread the good news of the gospel to those who haven't heard it, or to those who have heard it but didn't understand it, and also to help those who are in trouble through poverty of one sort or another.

We may also be disappointed unless we remember that the help we give to other people must not have an ulterior motive, but be solely for the person who we are befriending, our help must be unconditional and as Jesus said best done quietly.

St Matthew wrote at the beginning of chapter 6, "Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven".

"So, when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by men".

"Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret". "Then your Father who sees what you do in secret, will reward you".

To sum up then; works without faith won't do it for us, nor will faith without works, we need both faith and works and the works must be born of faith not of fear.