

SERMON ~ BIBLE READING: MATTHEW 25:31-46

INCARNATION

It's so easy at Christmas time to wrap up in all the festive trimmings what Christmas is really all about. So no wonder we lose sight of that very special word that is at the heart of Christmas – incarnation. To spell out that very special word, Christmas is about the Heavenly King being born of Mary; it's about the Eternal Word becoming a child without speech; it's about the One who is robed in glory being wrapped in infant clothes; it's about the Lord of heaven and earth being laid in a manger; it's about Jesus moving into the neighbourhood to identify with humankind, human beings like you and me. In his letter to the Christians in Philippi, Paul, quoting the words of what is probably an early Christian hymn, describes the incarnation in these terms:

‘Christ Jesus...being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness...’

Or in the message translation:

‘Christ Jesus had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human.’

Jesus became one of us. The One through whom creation was brought into being identifies totally with his creation.

IDENTIFICATION

One of the influential books for me, when I was student at New College, was “Who is God?”, written by one of the then lecturers, Bill Shaw. In the first chapter he talks about what it means to say “God is love”. He talks about love as ‘concern’ – God has concern for us; he then talks about love as ‘care’, that is ‘concern’ put into action – God cares for us; he goes on to talk about love as ‘compassion’, ‘caring’ enough to come alongside – God shows compassion to us; and finally he talks about love as ‘identification’, so coming alongside that we actually identify with others – God identifies with us.

So Jesus' complete identification with humankind is not just an abstract concept, a nice idea – it is God's love in action at the deepest level and in the most wonderful way as he identifies with our basic human needs. If our basic needs for water, food, clothing and shelter are not being met, if mercy and compassion are withheld, Jesus feels our oppression and despair and states that, '...whatever you did not do for one of the least important of these members of my family, you did not do for me'.

EXPECTATION

Just as Jesus came in love, to serve, he expects that love for our Christian brothers and sisters will be the natural response of those who follow him – and he expects that we won't just express concern but that we will even go beyond care and compassion until we identify with our Christian sisters and brothers. If we ignore the needs of people within our church family, we ignore the God who established that family to be based on love, service, sacrifice, identification.

To be sure, Jesus is talking specifically about how we respond to his followers and our fellow Christians. But we can assume, based on what we know of who God is, that acts of care, compassion and identification are to be extended to those beyond the Church family. For if these acts of care, compassion and identification do not begin in the Church family, how will they ever flourish beyond it?

Can we, dare we let him down? Can we, dare we ignore the God who calls us to a life of love, service, sacrifice, identification?

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

'Compassion is the basis of all morality.' (Albert Schweitzer)

'I hold that Christian grace abounds where charity is seen; that when we climb to heaven, 'tis on the rounds of love to men.' (Alice Cary)

GOING DEEPER

Questions on the Bible passage and sermon for you to think about during the week, either on your own or in a small group:

1. How would you answer someone who claims that Matthew 25:31-46 suggests Jesus is teaching salvation by works rather than by faith?
2. How would you describe the distinction between general 'good works' and what happens when Jesus' followers act together as a community?

3. To what extent does our culture make it more difficult to know and respond to each other's needs in our Christian communities? What could we do to be more open and honest about our needs, without humiliating individuals or neglecting their needs?