

I don't know about you but finishing things off is not one of my strong points. I have a tendency to go for, "for now" solutions – you know the sort of thing, when I am trying to find a home for something and I will put it on that shelf 'for now' and it is still there three weeks later! 'For now' solutions are rapidly being banned – and quite right too because finishing things well is really important.

But that doesn't mean finishing things can be easy. What about reading a book? You may well have been dawdling through a book, reading it a few pages at a time, and then you get to the exciting part, and you can't put it down – and then it's finished, and you don't want it to be finished – perhaps you want to know what happened next, and there isn't a next?

And what about a television series you have enjoyed – perhaps you have watched the last four series, and at the end of each series you say, 'No – you can't end the series like that' but you have no choice apart from waiting for the next series to be available – but then the creators make the decision not to make another series, and you will never see the ending you had hoped for.

Ending some things are a bit less stressful though – instead you just need to be orderly. What about the end of the growing season for a vegetable garden. The tomatoes finished a while ago – there are just a couple of green ones left in the utility room to hopefully ripen. The plants are gone; the stress of what to do with year's courgette glut is finished; The strawberries are a distant memory – just a few beetroot and actually some unexpected large carrots still in the bed – but the rest is ready for next season.

On a larger scale, as I run round the fields I am always impressed by there hardly being a gap between the harvest of a field with this year's crop and next year's seeds being in and sprouting – an end followed so quickly by a new beginning.

And the church's calendar is rather like that. This Sunday sees two things – the Feast of Christ the King, and the last Sunday of Ordinary time. So what is that? The church splits its year into several seasons. It begins with Advent which looks forward to Christmas. The wise men are remembered at Epiphany, after which there is a period of 'ordinary time'.

Then the six weeks of Lent prepare us for Easter leading forward to his Ascension and the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church at Pentecost. 'Ordinary time' then resumes until the end of the year.

So-called 'ordinary time' is hardly boring. It allows for more continuous reading from the Bible, for the exploration of themes such as creation and the environment, or as we shall see, more theologically challenging issues like judgement. But, as far as Sundays is concerned, we come to another end - the end of the church year, and the end of this Ordinary time. Next week, it all starts again with Advent – which I'm sure Angela will talk more about then.

But on the last Sunday of Ordinary Time we are celebrating Christ the King – the King having the full rights to reign over the church and the world as King. We often talk about the Kingdom of God where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Christ the King – like no other King. And our gospel reading today picks this up when it talks about the judgement of the Nations by the King. And actually this reading brings us to another end point – the end of Matthews retelling of Jesus' teaching.

The beginning of chapter 21 of Matthew's gospel marks the beginning of the end of Jesus' ministry on earth. He make his triumphal entry into Jerusalem; we have the crowds waving branches (or palms as we like to see them) in celebration, and we have Jesus cleansing the temple as only Jesus can. And then we have a whole set of teachings – Ordinary time you could say – culminating in chapters 24 and 25 which is the final discourse about the future, with emphasis especially on the theme of judgement. Here Jesus told his disciples what was to happen at the end of time; he taught them to be ready as we don't know when the end of time will come – using the parable of the ten bridesmaids; and then all about making the best use of what you have and opportunities – using the parable of the talents – and our reading is the culmination of that teaching, as from chapter 26 onwards we pick up the story again.

This reading, often referred to as the parable of the sheep and the goats, is not as straight forward as perhaps it seems to be. For me it raises a number of questions which I'd like to look at this morning:

Is the passage really saying that those people who feed the hungry and thirsty, those that welcome the strangers, those that clothe the naked, those that care for the sick and those who visit the prisoners will be saved, and those who don't won't?

What does verse 40 mean – “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.”

What does this passage say to us in terms of how we relate to Christ, the King in practical terms?

So, that first question. The problem we have here is twofold. First, there is nothing particularly Christian about this set of actions – I'm sure all Christians would either do, or support others doing in whatever way they can, this list - feed the hungry and thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, care for the sick and prisoners. But is that enough to be used as the deciding issue on the day of judgement? Is there a clue to this in my second question when Jesus said, “, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me”? Does making this connection between those being helped and Jesus make the actions those of a Christian? The trouble with this is that it falls down as both the sheep and the goats – as they are described here – fully admit that they didn't realise there was any connection between their treatment of these needy people and Jesus as they ask, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food” or “and didn't take care of you”. That rather suggests that any connection with Jesus was accidental.

And there is then the second problem. This method of God's judging people would be what we describe as justification by deeds – but this totally contradicts the teaching of St Paul who says that since we are all sinners and fall short of the glory of God, God's judging of people will be on the basis of their faith, not actions. Is there some way that both Matthew's view and Paul's view can be correct?

Let's go back to that verse 40 question and consider what the verse actually means – “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.” So is the real question, who do we mean by this group of people, “Members of my family”. Does that include everyone in the world? Thinking of biblical times was that just the Jews or did it include the Gentiles? For the answer to this we need to go back to the time when Jesus called a child to him and told those listening, “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” So by, “members of my family”, Jesus means anyone who has accepted him as Saviour.

So what Jesus appears to be saying is that people will be saved – will be in the sheep group – if they care for those who have accepted Jesus as their Saviour – let's call that group disciples – you and me. But surely we should be caring for everyone, whether they are disciples or not. Absolutely we should, but those who are disciples, those people who Jesus is describing as, ‘members of my family’, are Jesus' representatives on earth, and by showing love for them, we are showing love for Jesus – and that is our criteria for being saved on judgement day.

So now let's consider my other question: “what does this passage say to us in terms of how we relate to Christ, the King in practical terms?” And for the answer to this I go the letter of James – one of my ‘go to ‘ books in the bible – a letter just packed with solid, sound advice. James chapter 2 v 14 says this, “What good is it my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks 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.” Yes, we are saved through faith, but our faith drives us to the actions listed in our gospel reading – so Matthew and Paul can both be right.

As we end this Christian year, let's take some time to consider what we can do – next year – to build our faith, to build our personal relationship with Jesus, Christ the King, and together build our Christian community, so our actions grow. I'd like to encourage you to start thinking about how in 2021, if you are not already, you can regularly read the bible – that may be through guided bible notes, or perhaps give yourself the challenge of reading the whole bible next year, and I would love to help you do that. In the meantime, in addition to Sunday morning worship, a group of us meet to worship with a mixture of songs, a bible reading and prayers on Wednesday evenings for 45 minutes or so – we call it Refresh – currently on Zoom but eventually that will be in person, and you can try that out now in the privacy of your own home. Building our faith is so important – and the actions that follow can then only be to the glory of Christ the King.

So, as we come to our final end this morning – the end of this sermon – let's reflect on what I have been talking about. Let's consider the things that we have done which have ended. Some of those may have ended by choice, some not. And then think about our reading this morning, and what could be considered the most important end – the day of judgement by Christ the King. But, then let's put those thoughts behind us as we prepare for next Sunday and new beginnings – new beginnings where we try and get closer to Christ the King; to increase our love for Him – knowing that his love for us is always total. Christ the King, who we are called to worship. Christ, the King of endless worth, no one could express how much you deserve.

Amen