

**SUNDAY OF THE WORD OF GOD**



# **Catholic Biblical Federation**

## **TOWARDS THE SUNDAY OF THE WORD OF GOD (21.1.2024)**

*20 January 2024 - Online Conference*

## **Matthew 25:31-46**

### **A justice possible for all**

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In the Gospel of Matthew, Matt 25:31-46, referred to as the “Last Judgement,” concludes the eschatological discourse in chapters 23-25 and the entire ministry of Jesus. It is placed immediately before the beginning of the passion account in 26:1. There are strong theological links with the immediate literary context as it reiterates the essential elements in the description of the *parusia* in Matt 24:29ff: the coming of the Son of Man and the eschatological gathering of the elect.

With vocabulary and imagery from the apocalyptic tradition (Dan 7:13; Zech 14:5), Matthew presents the ‘last page’ of human history where the secret of the heart is revealed, and the destiny of each person is accomplished at the coming of the Son of Man, who now “will be delivered to be crucified” (26:2). Not only Israel is brought to judgment but with her, all the nations of the earth (25:32). What was announced in 24:31 - “he will send his angels with a loud trumpet to gather *his elect* from the four winds” - has now been extended to include all the tribes of the earth.

Furthermore, the final judgement is linked with the ultimate establishment of the Kingdom of God, already announced in 4:17: “From then onwards Jesus began his proclamation with the message, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is close at hand’”. At the coming of the Son of Man in his glory and his enthronement on the judgement seat (25:31b), He will separate all the people gathered into two groups: the righteous and the evil ones. Matthew alludes to a prophetic image to show how the judgement would take place (cf. Ezek 34:16-17): the separation of the sheep from the goats. This renders the passage parabolic.

The interpretive key for the entire passage is the symmetric double dialogue, each of which presents three important moments: the judgement (vv. 34-36 and 41-43), the response of the judged (vv. 37-39 and 44), the justification for judgement (vv. 40 and 45). We find in the judgment declaration and the response from the judged the same list of six “works of mercy”: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome a stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick and visit those in prison repeated four times.

These repetitions are literary devices which Matthew employed to achieve a perlocutionary effect on Christian readers and encourage them to assume an open-mindedness towards

charity solidary. Earlier in the Gospel narrative, Jesus had already requested this way of living from his disciples when he admonished “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48; see also 6:1-4). Besides, this invitation and the works of mercy have deep roots in the Old Testament. For example, God visited the naked Adam and Eve and clothed them (Gen 3:21); God visited Abraham when he was sick and consoled Isaac in his afflictions (Gen 26:1-5).

Several examples abound in the Prophets and the Psalms where God is presented as a Shepherd who feeds, protects, guards, and cures his flock (Psa 23:1-3): “The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. In grassy meadows he lets me lie. By tranquil streams, he leads me to restore my spirit. He guides me in paths of saving justice as befits his name.” Notably, these acts of love of the Father are what Jesus invites his disciples to emulate by being perfect as the Father is perfect.

However, in the Matthean text, we do not have simply an *imitatio Dei* or a messianic program in favour of the poor or an ethical program. Rather the King-Judge identifies with the poor and needy and thus considers acts of love shown or negated to the ‘little ones’ in the community as done to him. The uniqueness and theological import of the final judgment is that the King -Judge considers himself not the subject but the object of the acts of mercy: “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.” These remarks surprise and astonish both those who practised mercy and those who did not because they were not aware that their acts were directed to Jesus.

For Matthew, the final judgement is universal because all nations are gathered for the judgment. Furthermore, it embraces all people whether they recognise Jesus or do not recognise him, and the criterion is mercy towards the less privileged, who could be said to be the ‘sacrament’ of the historical presence of the Son of Man. In the poor and the persecuted, the King-Judge, Jesus Christ is present in our contemporary world.

Though the judgment is universal in character, it is also personal since each person will be rewarded according to his or her deeds. That the ‘entry and belongingness to the Kingdom does not explicitly require knowledge of Christ but ‘welcoming’ a needy brother has occupied the attention of interpreters. Does the Christian have any advantages? What is clear in the text is that he or she will be judged based on practising ‘charity solidary’ - an act of concrete love.

Important for consideration, however, is the meaning of “‘the little one’ of my brothers” (cf. vv. 40.45), whom Jesus identifies with. Who are these? The materially poor? Or the disciples of Jesus? Or the poor and persecuted missionaries? The Greek word translated ‘little ones’ that Matthew used is found in many other places in his Gospel: In 18:6.10.14, the term is used to describe the defenceless and abandoned Christians; in 10:42, it refers to the poor and needy preachers of the Gospel who are to be heartily ‘welcomed’. Though the word ‘brother’ appears in many places, the syntagma ‘my brothers’ appears in only 12:49 and 28:10 to describe a disciple.

In the light of the above analysis, the ‘little brothers of Jesus’ are members of the community, who are abandoned, weak, considered insignificant and forgotten. More importantly, the ‘little ones’ are the poor and persecuted preachers of the Gospel. For this reason, we retain that the final

judgment re-echoes the affirmation of 10:42 “And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of water because he is a disciple, truly I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward”.

Having discussed the meaning of the text, the question that arises is ‘What hermeneutical journey does it propose for us as readers today? In other words, what is the significance of the text for us as Christians? What transformation is required of us?’

First, we need to realise that the message of the final judgment is addressed to all humanity and the Church in particular. All humans are reminded that there is salvation after death and entry into the blissful blessedness of the divine depends on love in concrete terms extended to the brethren, especially the less privileged in whom we encounter God himself.

As a Church and as Christians, the invitation is to recognise that it is not enough to be nominal Christians but to live the Gospel of love and solidarity expressed in the works of mercy; in other words, to embrace the ethics of responsibility. Being a child of Abraham or a disciple of Christ, therefore, does not guarantee entry into the Kingdom of God. The path of salvation entails a humble ‘listening’ of the Torah and responsible obedience to a God who has become one of us, “to bring the good news to the afflicted.... to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free (Luke 4:18). We are, therefore, reminded that the love of God and love of neighbour have become one: in the ‘little ones’ of the brothers, we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God.

At the end of our lives, both Christians and non-Christians will be judged based on the love of God and the love of our neighbour. Therefore, the text of Matthew has a universal value both for believers and non-believers. For this reason, the heralds of the Gospel are to make the message of love known to the entire world. Here lies the mission of the Church *ad gentes*.

Two Ghanaian proverbs, which readily come to mind, may help us in appropriating the message of the final judgment:

- **“A good deed is like a tree that bears fruit”**. The proverb emphasises the importance of doing good deeds, which can have a lasting impact on the world. Human life in all its dimensions (spiritual, social, political, economic, and religious), as well as non-human creatures, are positively impacted by acts of love towards God and our neighbours.

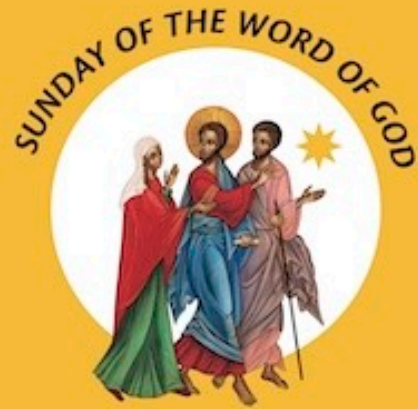
- **“When you help someone uphill, you get to the top yourself.”** This proverb highlights the idea that helping others can also benefit us in the long run. As one responds to the cries of the afflicted and persecuted, he or she begins on the path of salvation. Where I want to arrive, I should help others too to arrive there.

In conclusion, the road to the Kingdom requires ‘charity solidary’ where the self and the other can experience in the countenance of each other the weakness of the Lord that requests an embrace of welcome. We can witness to the God who has chosen the incarnation as a means of radical solidarity with his creature *only by being a prophetic and solidary community*.

It is for this reason that the Fathers of the Church repeatedly emphasise in their teaching that you cannot follow Christ without recognising him in the poor: “You who are servants of Christ, his brothers and co-heirs, while it is not late, help Christ, feed Christ welcome Christ, honour Christ” (Gregory Nazianzus).

John Chrysostom, for example, reproaches he who honours the “sacrament of the altar” and ignores the poor. The respect accorded the Eucharist should ripple to reach “the sacrament of the brother”: “Do you want to honour the body of Christ? Do not allow it to become an object of contempt in his members, namely, the poor deprived of blankets to cover themselves. Do not honour him here in Church with precious clothing while you abandon him outside to suffer the cold and nakedness. The body of Christ on the altar does not need overcoats, but pure hearts; he who is outside needs much attention...

For this reason, while you decorate the place of worship, do not close your heart to the brother who suffers.” In the same vein, Pope Francis indicates that the only road to travel for a rebirth of our communities is to become a Church “poor and for the poor”.



Sunday 21 January 2024

<https://c-b-f.me/DPD2024-EN>

