

Sermon Archive 461

Sunday 26 November, 2023

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reading: Matthew 25: 31-46

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Who is this Son of Man who sits on the throne, with all the angels with him? Who is this, sifting the state of the world, judging, revealing what has been, what is, what ever shall be, with his light of truth? Indeed, who is the king?

If I am someone directed to his *left* hand, then I will tell you that I've never seen him before. He doesn't seem even slightly familiar. But of course! When did you find anyone in your neighbourhood with a coterie of angels? No, most of the people inhabiting my world are much more plain. You know, the way they dress; their posture; the rhythm of their speech, the words they choose to begin conversations that I don't initiate (Are you the minister? Hey, have you got a minute?) Not all of them initiate conversation. Sometimes they just walk by, or sit there - projecting something (not sure whether they intend to, or whether it just happens - they just being who they are). The social observers have coined a phrase for what's going on as I discern this "just being who they are". They call it my "unconscious bias".

- *Equality Challenge Unit UK: Unconscious Bias in Higher Education Review 2013*. Unconscious bias:

"Refers to a bias that we are unaware of and which happens outside of our control. It is a bias that happens automatically and is triggered by our brain making quick judgements and assessments of people and situations, influenced by our background, cultural environment and personal experiences." They can occur when we make fast judgements, are tired or under pressure. Often, they may be incompatible with our conscious values and considered actions.

They also talk about **Implicit bias**

"Refers to the same area, but questions the level to which these biases are unconscious especially as we are being made increasingly aware of them. Once we know that biases are not always explicit, we are responsible for them. We all need to recognise and acknowledge our biases and find ways to mitigate their impact on our behaviour and decisions."

It's nice that the sociologists are questioning the extent to which our biases are unconscious or conscious, since, truth be told, claiming unawareness can be convenient for those who would avoid responsibility. Did I mention that the king was unfamiliar - never seen him before? *I didn't know* it was him. I think that's right.

As for the non-kings, the non-royals, I'm not sure that they're my responsibility anyway. When did anyone declare me to be my brother's keeper - or sister's come to think of it. There *is* this thing called personal responsibility for our own lives, and you know, we all have an equal chance to make something of ourselves. If some aren't doing well, well . . .

Who is the king? And why is he causing me to say these defensive kinds of things?

-ooOoo-

Who is this Son of Man who sits on the throne, with all the angels with him? Who is he, sifting the state of the world, judging, revealing what has been, what is, what ever shall be, with his light of truth?

Well; if I am someone directed to his *right* hand, then I also will tell you that I've never seen him before. He doesn't seem even slightly familiar. Just like my brothers and sisters directed to his left, my world's not full of kings and angels. Mine's inhabitants are much more plain. I don't know why the poem comes to mind. 1883, Emma Petrarcan writes "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore."

Hey, Emma! How's your unconscious bias?

Or, no; Emma's poem's about the humanity of those who have need. It's about decent welcome for those who need room to live, to breathe. It's hard to tell, really, what Emma meant, if we're not going to paste our Twenty first Century requirements on her Nineteenth Century work. Just hope nobody engraves her words in the meantime on a statue called Liberty where the word "liberty" has grown to mean something entirely else. Maybe we'll let that be, and go instead for the wee phrase "there, but for the grace of God, go I".

Nice expression, really. Because it talks about the something that human beings have in common - some sorts of shared vulnerability, shared openness to things going wrong. And it floats all that in close proximity to a reference to God's grace - grace (an open, loving, kind response) - although you don't want to get too caught up in any deeper thinking about God being gracious to me,

but not to her, to him. Too much pondering of that is only going to make grace look like capricious spirit. So let's pull back just short of there.

What am I trying to say? I'm trying to say that I have not seen the king. But what I have seen has caused me to think about what human beings have in common - even though sometimes our expression of what we have in common is riven with condescension, bias and prejudice. But if the king is at all human, then maybe I could accept that he's been here, even if I haven't seen him. I think, though, I'd still be surprised if my apprehension of his presence had enabled me to do anything charitable. It would still be with significant surprise that I would say "Lord, when did we see you?" Who is this king? And why is he calling me "blessed by the Father", inheritor of the kingdom?

-ooOoo-

Who is this Son of Man who sits on the throne, with all the angels with him? Who is he, sifting the state of the world, judging, revealing what has been, what is, what ever shall be, with his light of truth?

Well; let's say that I'm someone who isn't directed to his **right** hand, or **left**. Let's say that I'm someone listening to the story being told, and I realise that they're talking about me. The one about whom the unconscious bias is held, or the not-so-unconscious bias. The one whom Emma called huddled, wretched refuse. The one described as not having received the grace of God. Let's claim the king's own description: "the least of these brothers and sisters of mine". His expression at least introduces into the "modesty" a degree of dignity. As he separates the sheep from the goats, as he judges the nations .

. .

You know, we're quite familiar with the God who judges - the wailing and gnashing of teeth, the cursing and burning of fire. It turns the gospel into a horror story. And we know the church's quickness to use the God of judgment to break people who ought not to be broken. We know judgment as a kind of antithesis of love. Who is that kind of king?

But consider this. I, one of the least of the sisters and brothers, have known the judgment by others. I have been called wretched and huddled. I have been turned away, even though my need screamed through my nakedness, hunger and thirst. And in much of this, I have been powerless. They have said what they have said while I said nothing. They have believed about me whatever they chose to, no matter what the truth was. There were indeed times when I have spoken about what happened to me, and they have said "we don't believe you". No one took me seriously enough to listen to my story, much less to defend me.

But now, to my defence (at last), someone is bringing truth. Is the truth setting us free?

We are very good at hearing this parable through the ears of sheep or goats. What if we hear it through the ears of the little ones?

It's not like we're listening for retribution or punishment. It's not like we're wanting to get even. But we **are** hearing truth being told at last. We are hearing that the angels are on the side of the compassionate. We are hearing that someone cared.

Will it change what happened when we were naked and hungry? No. Will it win new hearts to the side of the sheep so that those who form the next generation of the naked and hungry will have a better chance? Maybe. Will it bring to our understanding of the King a love that had drained from the nature of the Judge? So we pray.

*Pavilioned in splendour, and girded with praise,
Our Shield and Defender, the Ancient of Days.*

Who is the King? And why is he drawing me towards an expression of praise?

-ooOoo-

Who is this Son of Man who sits on the throne, with all the angels with him? Who is he, sifting the state of the world, judging, revealing what has been, what is, what ever shall be, with his light of truth?

Indeed, who is he, if I am sitting in Knox Church today? Who is he, as I contend with ideas like that maybe I have unconscious bias? Who is he, as I wonder about the lines that creep and fade and solidify between unconscious and conscious? Who is he, as I develop my words for describing luck, fortune, self-making and tragic turning? Who is he, as I process where he is, how he is present in those I meet and do not meet each day? Who is he, as I ponder that when nobody seemed to care, he cared? Who is he, as we judge, are judged, and reminded of a love as fierce as any fire?

And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.'

We keep a moment of quiet.

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