

An Address  
St John's Community Services  
St John's Darlinghurst  
11 August 2022

Matthew 25: 40

The King will reply, Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.

It's a great pleasure to be with you for this special service of prayer, thanksgiving and welcome tonight. I'm so grateful for the many people within the parish and beyond who are committed to offering to this community safety, security, welcome and the hospitality of the gospel in Jesus' name. SJCS does this through its counselling and food hospitality ministry, legal services and advocacy and especially through Banksia Women - serving women impacted by family violence, and Rough Edges - serving those affected by homelessness. This work is important, rare, beautiful and Christ-honouring. Thank you.

Near the end of Matthew's gospel, we encounter a dramatic scene. Jesus says, *When the Son of Man comes in glory and all his angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne.* It is a picture of the final judgement. It jumps over the passion and death of Jesus which is about to unfold and it jumps to the end of history. The bible is informed by the conviction that the man who lived and died in Galilee twenty centuries ago, is none other than this world's judge. He gave himself on a cross so that we could be forgiven and sends his messengers of truth and love into the world in his name. He is the one who will one day ask

for an account of what we have done with the gospel we heard and the lives we were lent.

Jesus paints a picture of the nations gathered before him and being divided by him into two groups. One group is commended and welcomed and the other is exposed and sent away. The difference between these two groups is how they have interacted with people who are described as ‘the least of these brothers and sisters of mine.’

V35

*Jesus says, I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.*

Notice the categories of need that are identified. I don't think we have to assume they are exhaustive of all the kinds of need that exist in the world – and yet they are a comprehensive set of needs. Food and water are basic – something to eat and something to drink. The truth is, that for many, what is basic in life is also missing. The most desperate condition to be in, is to be unable to obtain what is most basic. *You gave me something to drink, you gave me something to eat.* This is exactly what Rough Edges does. In a world of consumption and fast food and 24 hour eateries – as well in this city, as some of the world's most exclusive and expensive restaurants – there are thousands of our neighbours who have no certainty about where their next meal is coming from or when. Nor is it possible to survive for very long without food and water.

*I was stranger and you invited me in.* Here is the condition of social isolation. It can arise in a number of different ways. You can be new in town - and people who are new in Sydney, or fleeing from some situation or pressure or stress elsewhere, may easily find themselves in this part of Sydney. You can be a stranger because you are from a different culture, a refugee, or a person in a new and unexpected situation - a stranger to hard circumstances through the loss of a rental accommodation, or the need to flee from a violent context, or the loss of work.

When you are a stranger – what you need most is a friend. The very last thing you can expect or demand and yet a wonderful gift if you find a friend who can take you in. *You in invited me in* – Jesus says. A gesture of welcome, of invitation, of recognising the dignity and the sanctity of another’s humanity despite their circumstances, offering a hand of friendship, a listening ear, a supportive arm – *you invited me in*. It is just what Jesus does for us all in the gospel – *come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest*. The stranger is never at rest – where shall I stay? who can I trust? what will happen if I close my eyes and sleep? – *you invited me in*.

*I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me.*

Nakedness – a condition of poverty, exposure, vulnerability, humiliation. To be naked – subject to ridicule, exploitation or sheer indifference as people look away. Those who live on the streets know what it is to be not seen, to be looked through, as though they were not naked but invisible. Yet, the Bible says, every person is clothed in the image of God, precious in God’s sight.

In the ancient world, there were few medications and no hospitals – sickness often meant isolation and exclusion lest you bring a contagion into the community. Caring for the sick was rapidly established as a mark of the early Christians who not only cared for their own, but for whoever was sick and in need – no doubt in part, because of this teaching. In the ancient world, caring for the sick involved the risk of falling ill oneself. The sociologist and historian Rodney Stark says, that the early Christians cared for the sick and dying compelled by the sacrificial example of Jesus in giving himself for others, and their steadfast faith in the resurrection. They were convinced that if they died they would be resurrected to eternal life and enter a new and better existence - so that they were free to take risks in this world knowing that Jesus was raised from the dead and would welcome those who were his into eternal dwellings. *I was sick and you cared for me.*

*I was in prison and you visited me.* No one learns the meaning of the phrase ‘out of sight, out of mind’ like the prisoner. *You visited me* – the gift of being remembered, the gift of society, conversation, prayer. Prisoners slowly become reconciled to their status as people without rights – but a visit bestows upon them the gift of fellowship, of being recognised as human and worthy of another person’s time.

Jesus says, *whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*

Can I draw your attention to a few matters?

First, *Jesus sees*.

Jesus sees the needy and he sees those who care for them. Jesus sees. He is not an ignorant judge – he knows all. He is not an indifferent judge – he cares about what is happening.

It is part of the experience of powerlessness and loss of control over your own circumstances that you feel unseen, unimportant, invisible. Jesus sees. And it is part of the ministry of caring that it can seem inexhaustible - never finished – and perhaps against a seeming unending tide of need, it can seem overwhelming and never making progress. And yet, Jesus sees what is done – and he sees every individual. The woman fleeing a violent and unsafe home for herself and her children. The man who loses his job and ends up on the street. The person who has been so exploited and misused by others they seek relief from their distress in a needle or a bottle. *Whatever you did for the least of these* – they are not the least to Jesus – they are not unimportant, unregarded, to him they are brothers and sisters. *Whatever you did for one of these brothers and sisters of mine*. He sees his brothers and sisters in need, and he sees those who care for them. Jesus sees.

Second, *Jesus is present with his people. Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*

As we serve those who belong to Jesus, we serve Jesus himself. *I was hungry, Jesus says, and you gave me something to eat. I was in prison and you visited me, he says.*

Jesus not only sees the least of these, but he identifies completely with his brothers and sisters so that when we serve them, we serve him. He is present with his people in weakness, and we serve the Lord when we serve those in need. Because I am a church leader, people offer to do things for me, or to give me things, or offer their assistance in various ways. I am grateful for it. A car park was reserved for me this evening – and car parks are not easy to come by in Kings Cross! But if you want to serve Jesus, then you will have to serve the least of these his brothers and sisters.

It seems plain that when Jesus speaks of his ‘brothers and sisters’ he does mean those who follow him. But there is no reason to draw the sphere of love narrowly. If you are tempted to ask, ‘who are Jesus’ brothers and sisters?’, then you are close to the man who asked Jesus ‘who is my neighbour?’, to whom Jesus replied, ‘be a neighbour to those in need.’ Jesus knows those who are his. We are to serve those whom we have opportunity to serve. The apostle captures the teaching of the Lord, ‘do good to all people, especially the household of faith.’ We are to serve those whom we have opportunity to serve – the Lord knows those who are his.

But lastly, I want to draw to your attention that those who served, did so completely unselfconsciously, unknowingly even. Not because they thought they were serving the Lord, but despite not knowing that they were doing so.

*Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? V37-38*

And here's the point – these were not do-gooders trying to score brownie points. These were people who were transformed by their experience of the grace of the God who welcomes us by his gospel, and filled with his Spirit they lived lives that displayed the grace of Jesus at work in them. They were people transformed by grace, not people seeking to win approval. They were people freed to serve, not burdened by charitable duty or obligation. They were people who loved, because Jesus first loved them. They showed the truth of their confession by the transformation of their lives. They showed the power of the risen Christ in them, by lives of joyful, sacrificial servanthood. They showed they belonged to Jesus by giving themselves away for others.

I am deeply grateful for the ministry of St Johns Community Services, Rough Edges, Banksia Women and I am grateful for all those who serve in this way. What you are doing is rare, important and beautiful. It may not be known by many, you may not get many accolades, sometimes it may even feel like an impossible and thankless task.

But Jesus sees, you are serving him when you serve the least of his brothers and sisters and he is in you too, by his Spirit, transforming and enabling you to do what pleases him. Be assured it is Jesus you are serving, even as he works in you to will and to do what is pleasing to him.

The Lord be with you.

*Kanishka Raffel*  
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*11 August 2022*