

Loddon Mallee Presbytery worship November 22nd Christ the King A, prepared by Rev. Cynthia Page

Call to Worship

Loving God, as we come to worship you:
open our eyes to see as you see
and to weep as you weep.
Open our hearts to love the broken
and care for those without hope.
Open our hands to hold what I have lightly
and to share cheerfully.
Open our mouths to speak for the voiceless
and to shout for mercy.
Open our ears to the gentle whispers
of your Spirit and to obey what you say.
Open up our lives to the call of your voice
and the needy cries of the dying. Amen.

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Video O worship the King

<https://youtu.be/Wy1ahfW14M0>

1. O worship the King all glorious above,
and gratefully sing his power and his love:
our shield and defender, the Ancient of Days,
pavilioned in splendour and girded with praise.
2. O tell of his might and sing of his grace,
whose robe is the light, whose canopy space;
his chariots of wrath the deep thunder-clouds form,
and dark is his path on the wings of the storm.
3. The earth, with its store of wonders untold,
Almighty, your power has founded of old;
established it fast, by a changeless decree,
and round it has cast, like a mantle, the sea.
4. Your bountiful care, what tongue can recite?
It breathes in the air, it shines in the light;
it streams from the hills, it descends to the plain,
and sweetly distils in the dew and the rain.
5. We children of dust are feeble and frail -
in you do we trust, for you never fail;
your mercies, how tender, how firm to the end!
our maker, defender, redeemer, and friend.
6. O measureless Might, unchangeable Love,
whom angels delight to worship above!
Your ransomed creation, with glory ablaze,
in true adoration shall sing to your praise!

Opening prayer

God, Father of the poor,
your son Jesus was born among us
poor, humble and dependent.
Open our eyes and our hearts and our hands
to honour him now as our Lord and King.
Enable us to welcome him
in those who are hungry and thirsty,
in all who are abandoned and lonely,
in refugees, in the poor and the sick.
Let our love become free and spontaneous,
like the tenderness you have shown us in your son.
Welcome us in the everlasting kingdom
prepared for us through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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Robert Grant (1779-1838) after William (ca. 1559-1594)
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Prayer of Confession

Merciful God, too often, we overlook the needs of people around us while we proclaim our devotion to you. We could do so much more to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, to welcome the stranger, and heal the sick. We fail to see how our prison system can diminish the humanity of all of us, how our medical system can deny healing to the poor, how poverty can leave children without what they need, how our legal processes can keep people estranged. Open our eyes to see your presence in every person, and to respond to their needs so that we may be rightly called by your name. Amen.

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Declaration of Forgiveness

In the name of Jesus the Christ, who brings peace and hope to us, we are forgiven, healed and enabled to be part of ministries of compassion in God's creation. Rejoice! We are chosen and loved! Hallelujah! Thanks be to God! Amen.

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Matthew 25:31-46, (NRSV)

³¹"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, *'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for 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, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'*

³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, *'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?'*

⁴⁰And the king will answer them, *'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.'* ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, *'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.'*

⁴⁴Then they also will answer, *'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'* ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, *'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'* ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Reflection

Wow! Have you noticed all the judgement in our Gospel reading the last few weeks? It's been full on. I'm a bit over it. I mean I demythologised hell and judgement decades ago. That's a fancy way of saying I re-thought my understanding of God and Christianity and removed the concept of wrath and judgement.

So I am not real comfortable with all this banging on about judgement and condemnation. And I know from 'the grapevine' that I am not the only one.

But did you see that there is more today?

Today's parable sorts people into sheep and goats and the goats get sent to eternal punishment.

That sounds like hell to me. Didn't we banish the concept of hell years ago? What are we going to do?

I guess we better have a look at the Gospel of Matthew and try to make sense of what we have been reading these last few weeks.

Let's look at **context** first.

I'd like to thank my friend and colleague, Rev. Dr. John Squires, for his help with this.

The final chapters of the Gospel of Matthew look like this:-
Jesus dramatically described the end times. He referred to wars and famines. (24:3-8)

Then straightaway, Jesus told four parables, one after another.
And yes, each one ended with an admonition to be alert and be prepared for the kingdom of God.

Each one ended with a dire warning about what will happen to those who are not adequately prepared.

1. Parable about an unprepared slave (24:45-51). Ending:

"He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (24:51).

2. Parable of the ten bridesmaids (25:1-13). Ending:

"Truly I tell you, I do not know you." (25:13).

3. Parable of the talents (25:14-30). Ending:

From those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (25:29-30).

4. Parable of the sheep and the goats (25:31-46). Ending:

“Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’ (25:41), and he concludes that “these will go away into eternal punishment” (25:46).

Some of us are feeling shocked and confused about all this judgement turning up at the end of our liturgical year and the end of Matthew’s Gospel but Rev. Dr. John Squires says that all of these dire warnings are consistent with the teachings of the ‘Matthean Jesus.’ What do I mean by the ‘Matthean Jesus? I mean the Jesus who is portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew in contrast to the Gospel of Mark, Luke or John.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus speaks of judgement early on as well:

1. In the ‘Sermon on the Mount’, Jesus tells those who talk the talk but do not walk the walk, “*I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers [lawless ones]*” (7:23).
2. Jesus refers to “weeping and gnashing of teeth” when he tells the Parable of the seeds. You know where the seeds were scattered and fell on different types of soil? (13:42)
3. Jesus tells a story about good and bad fish being caught in the same net (13:49)
4. Jesus tells a parable about a man who attended a wedding banquet wearing inappropriate dress and was bound and thrown into a place where folk gnashed their teeth. (22:14)
5. The Jesus portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew pronounces a series of woes upon the scribes and Pharisees, accusing them of being “hypocrites” (multiple times), children of hell (23:15), blind (23:19), neglectful of the Law (23:23), self-indulgent (23:25), full of filth (23:27) and lawlessness (23:28).

Jesus ends this series of invective denunciations with the clear condemnation: “you snakes, you brood of vipers—how can you escape being sentenced to hell?” (23:33).

So, we have seen that the Jesus portrayed in the Gospel of Matthew is seriously cranky. He preaches judgement and consequences and punishment a lot.

It doesn’t make me feel very comfortable. How about you?

In our post-post-modern sophisticated society with our love of nuance and qualification, this relentless and blunt referring to judgement and condemnation is difficult to absorb.

Help! How do we make sense of this? Is this judgement and condemnation unique to the author of the Gospel of Matthew or is he being faithful to the historical Jesus?

Uniting Church Minister and scholar, Rev. Dr. John Squires, believes the author of the Gospel of Matthew is accurately portraying the historical Jesus.

To support his belief, Squires quotes Luke 13:28 where, while speaking about the narrow way, Jesus warns his followers, “I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers! There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham

and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out.”

A version of this saying is also found in Matt 8:11-12. The fact that it appears in both the Gospel of Matthew and Luke tells us that this reference to Jesus being judgemental is part of the ‘Sayings of Jesus’, a collection of sayings that both the author of the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke draw on.

Given they are drawing from a collection of the sayings of Jesus, it is highly likely that Jesus did preach judgement and condemnation to those who didn’t act in kingdom ways.

This preaching echoes the Psalms and other Hebrew Scriptures where there is much referring to gnashing of teeth and weeping.

Jesus stands in the tradition of the Psalms, affirming the ‘righteous-justice’ exhibited by those who faithfully live by the Law.

Whether we like it or not, it seems the author of the Gospel of Matthew accurately depicts Jesus as consistently and insistently holding the people of Israel in his time to account. And speaking of judgement and punishment.

Jesus tells them to live according to ‘righteous-justice.’ If not, people must be prepared to experience consequences for breaching the covenant and ignoring the Law.

But what about all the words of love and grace in the New Testament?
We’re people of grace now aren’t we?

Haven’t we seen lots of examples of Jesus:

- reaching out beyond traditional barriers
- offering an inclusive vision of the kingdom
- throwing open the doors of welcome to all comers?

Haven’t we heard Jesus offering everyone abundant life?

Yes, we certainly have but for the author of the Gospel of *Matthew*, Jesus:

- speaks truth
- calls out sin
- adheres to standards
- advocates for a deep ‘righteous-justice’ that includes proclaiming judgement.

A story from my days as a teacher might help us with this. I am sure any other teachers or anyone who has led groups of people will understand.

I remember teaching a class of twenty-five young women. Twenty-four were lovely and no trouble. One was diabolical and challenging.

Did I focus on the twenty-four and downplay the one? No, sadly not. Too often, I took the one demanding student home and forgot the blessing of the twenty-four well behaved students.

In the parables of Jesus it is easy to focus on the judgement and negativity and not notice the blessings and positive parts of the parables.

Squires argues the negative examples and judgement are used as a literary and teaching tool to advocate for positive choices for God and to affirm the blessing of choosing to be in a covenantal relationship with God.

We need to focus, most of all, on:

- the **blessing** given to the slave at work when the Master arrives.
- the **affirmation** of the wisely prepared virgins who were ready and “went with him [the bridegroom] into the wedding banquet.” (25:10).
- the slaves **commended** with the words, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master” (25:21, 23).
- the **abundant welcome** offered to “the sheep”, whose good deeds lead them to be invited, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (25:34), and who, as “the righteous”, will inevitably experience “eternal life” (25:46).

I don't know about you but I like being blessed. I don't like judgement and condemnation.

And, I, sure as hell, (Ha! Ha! Did you see that?) don't want to end up in a place that makes me gnash my teeth and weep.

So, how do we avoid that place? How do we gain God's blessing?

How do we receive an invitation to the kingdom, to the place of pleasant eternal life?

Those invited to the banquet, to be part of the eternal kingdom of God, ‘feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, take care of the sick, and visit those in prison (25:35-36).

They live with a knowledge of grace but they fulfil the Law that the grace came to enrich.

In today's parable, “the sheep” demonstrated an unflinching commitment to the way of life enjoined by the Law. They lived, breathed, and offered ‘righteous-justice’ in what they did.

They exhibited ‘righteous-justice’, which Squires argues is the heart of the covenant, in contrast to lives which are lived without reference to the Law.

Squires claims there is no justice without judgement. There is no justice without righteous deeds. Righteous deeds require fidelity to the Law.

Righteous-justice and fearsome judgement are two sides of the one coin. We can't have one without the other.

To follow the Way of Love **IS** to live out the ethical demands of Jesus. These ethical demands are the same as those described in the Hebrew Scriptures.

And to do so is a **blessing**, now and forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.

P.S. The sheep include Jews and Gentiles. All people who live out these ethical demands, this Way of Love.

Reflective Prayer

King of kings

Lord of lords

Glory Hallelujah!

really?

Are these words just a neat, peppy praise song,
fun to sing, but empty of meaning?

No kings around here that I know of,
but a lot of politicians who act as if folks
are against them if you are not with them.

No Lords around here except those
who think they can lord it over everyone else,
but debt and worry and fear control my life;

Glory seems to be in short supply these days,
and Hallelujahs don't seem to mean much to most folks;
but you:

you are a mystery solved in the impossibilities of life;
an enigma wrapped in wonder;
a majesty born in humility;
a life blossoming out of death.
and you, you I could follow forever.

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Offering prayer

May these gifts bring light to those who walk in darkness,
hope to those who live in despair,
and justice to those who are oppressed.

Grant to each giver a sense of participation

in the most important opportunity of all time: to share your love with the world.

To this end, we dedicate our offerings and ourselves. Amen.

Prayers for Others

God, help us welcome those who have come to dwell among us.

For all those who have come fleeing oppression and persecution:

God, help us welcome those who have come to dwell among us.

For those who have come fleeing hardship and hunger:

God, help us welcome those who have come to dwell among us.

For those who have come to join loved ones already here:

God, help us welcome those who have come to dwell among us.

For those who have come seeking freedom and opportunity:

God, help us welcome those who have come to dwell among us.

Let us remember the words of Christ, who said
*"I was hungry and you gave me food,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was a stranger and you welcomed me."*

When, Lord, were you a stranger that we welcomed among us?

"Truly, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me"

When we welcomed the stranger, we welcomed you, Christ Jesus, in our midst!

Loving God, you call us to create hospitable communities.
Help us to overcome any fear and anxiety
we may have of those who come from other lands to live among us.
Give us the courage and wisdom to create compassionate and just immigration policies.
Grant that we may all live together in peace and love. Amen.

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuMh_ept-Js

Crown him with many crowns,
the Lamb upon his throne.
Hark! How the heavenly anthem drowns
all music but its own.
Awake, my soul, and sing of him
who died for thee,
and hail him as thy matchless King
through all eternity.

Crown him the Lord of life,
who triumphed over the grave,
and rose victorious in the strife
for those he came to save.
His glories now we sing,
who died, and rose on high,
who died eternal life to bring,
and lives that death may die.

Crown him the Lord of love,
behold his hands and side,
those wounds, yet visible above,
in beauty glorified.
No angel in the sky
can fully bear that sight,
but downward bends his burning eye
at mysteries so bright.

Crown him the Lord of years,
the Potentate of time,
Creator of the rolling spheres,
ineffably sublime.
all hail, Redeemer, hail!
For thou has died for me;
Thy praise and glory shall not fail
throughout eternity.

Blessing

As the kookaburra gently settles on the tree,
receive the gift of peace.
As the flame rises with light and warmth,
receive the gift of life.
As the wind moves and dances round the earth,
receive the gracious gift of the Spirit.
Go into this week confident
that God's gifts of life, peace and wisdom
are in you and with you.
You have all you will need.
In the name of Christ. Amen.

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