

Group Notes 20 November 2011
For the least of these my brothers...

Welcome - Ice Breaker

Have you ever met a VIP or a celebrity? What happened?

Word – Matthew 25:31-46

I am always uncomfortable preaching on this passage! God usually sends me someone difficult to deal with soon after. It's as though He's saying, "OK Colin, nice sermon, you can talk the talk – but can you walk the walk? You can tell others that they should take care of the needy and the dispossessed – but can you do it yourself?"

Perhaps Christians have a tendency to romanticise the needy. But actually they are often awkward and difficult to deal with. Sometimes huge problems have brought them to the state they are in, and those same problems can make them angry or moody or feckless. The idea that they will respond to our kindness with grateful thanks and then spend a few hours meditating on what wonderful people we are may lead to disappointment...

Question 1:

- **Has anyone in the group had any experience looking after needy people? How did it go?**
- **Do Christians sometimes romanticise the poor? Why?**
- **Did anyone watch *Rev* on Thursday? What do you think of the vicar's relationship with Colin?**

Case study – Garry. Garry recently came to church wet through and very cold. He is a rough sleeper and when he is found accommodation he often gets into fights and gets thrown out. It had been raining and his clothes were soaked. He stayed all morning, during the 8am and 10am services. People were very kind, they made him comfortable, brought him cups of tea, dried his clothes, went and bought him some food. In the afternoon Garry came back to the St Matthew's Centre and someone let him. He disrupted the services of our Asian congregation and another church that meets in the Centre. He was very aggressive and threatened a number of people. Finally he left, setting off the fire alarm as he did so.

I decided after discussion with the wardens to ban Garry from the church and Centre. It was a very difficult decision, bearing in mind today's passage. What swayed it for my conscience is that there were people in the church and the centre who are also vulnerable people – children, the elderly, the infirm. Surely they deserve our care too? As long as Garry is rampaging about they will not feel that they can come and be cared for. They will have no choice but to stay away. The line Garry crossed was to threaten the well-being of others who are also entitled to be seen as "the least of these my brothers." If we can't protect them then are we doing what Jesus told us to in today's reading?

Question 2:

- **Was there more that could have been done for Garry in this situation?**
- **Do you think it was the right decision to ban him? Why?**
- **What would Jesus do in this situation?**

Nonetheless there is no doubt here that Jesus our King commands us to take care of those in need. The passage emphasises the majesty and glory of Jesus as the Son of Man who sits on the throne to judge all the people of the earth. The amazing thing for Jesus' Jewish listeners was that they all knew who is the King who will come to judge the earth - none other than the Lord our God, King of the Universe. In this story Jesus is saying that's me.

One of the great paradoxes of Christianity is that the *Shepherd* who judges the sheep and the goats also became the *Lamb*, one of the flock who also shares with the flock in their experiences of life and death, joy and suffering. He is King, not only of glory, majesty and eternity but also of humility, poverty and pain. His demand that we have compassion for the poor flows from his own sharing in their needs.

There's a story about Judgment Day that goes like this:

All the nations of the world are gathered on a vast plain before the throne of God. A vast mist is rolling over the crowd and a gnawing anxiety fills every heart at the prospect of their impending fate. Then someone speaks up: "What right has God to judge us, up there on His throne? He doesn't know what we've had to go through! Until He's been human like us He'll never know!" A deep voice comes out of the mist: "All right, tell me what I need to do, present your demands – then we'll see whether I have any right to judge you."

So the people put together their list of what God would have to go through. "Let him be born into abject poverty!" said one. "Yes, without even a home to call his own!" called another. "Let his parentage be doubted!" "Let him live in an occupied country ruled by a murderous tyrant!" "Yes, let him and his family have to flee for their lives and become refugees!" "Let his mission be misunderstood and his message be rejected!" "Let him be the victim of a great injustice!" "Let him suffer terribly and die all alone!" "Let his friends betray him and desert him in his hour of greatest need!" When the list was complete, they shouted out their demands to God. Then the mist slowly rolled back, and there, in front of the throne, was a cross. And a great silence fell upon that plain...

Question 3:

- **In what ways is that story relevant to today's Bible passage?**
- **How do you think God's compassion and His justice are connected?**

Worship ideas for groups with no musicians.

Read out Colossians 1:15-20 to the group. Now tell them we are going to substitute "You are" for "He is" throughout the passage, as follows:

¹⁵ **You are** the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in **you** all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through **you** and for **you**. ¹⁷ **You are** before all things, and in **you** all things hold together. ¹⁸ And **you are** the head of the body, the church; **you are** the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything **you** might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in **you**, ²⁰ and through **you** to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through **your** blood, shed on the cross.

You might find it helpful to print this out and give everyone a copy, to make it easier to read. Now all read it out together as a prayer of worship and adoration to our awesome Lord.

Works/witness.

Can you do a small act of compassion for "one of the least of these my brothers" this week and tell the group how it went next session?

Our Christmas flyers and posters are now available. Could you take on some streets in the area and distribute them, individually or as a group? Can you take some spares and give them to your friends?