

Hinde Street Methodist Church 22nd November 2020

Rev Peter Cornick

The Judgement of the King

Ezekiel 34: 11-16 & 20-24

Matthew 25: 31-46

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. (Matthew 25: 40)

Introduction

The BBC series, *Small Axe*, which screened the first of five films last Sunday evening, has been described by theologian Robert Beckford, as 'arguably one of the most important series' in the BBC's 'illustrious history.' This is quite a claim by Professor Beckford speaking on Thought for the Day and I do recommend you watch the first film on BBC iPlayer if you missed it. The film called, *Mangrove*, is a compelling and disturbing watch and Professor Beckford is really not exaggerating the importance of this film. As he says, it unearths a hidden history of Black lives – a history which confronts Britain with not only its past, but questions about its present. (Robert Beckford, www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p08yz59z)

Mangrove charts the life of a small café in Notting Hill called *Mangrove*, its owners and patrons, particularly nine of them who were arrested. In the late 60s, *Mangrove* had become the focus and heart of the West Indian community, but it was constantly raided, violently so, by racially motivated police. Whether it be the police, the courts, or public opinion, The 'Mangrove Nine' had to battle the might of the British establishment in the pursuit of justice.

A God of Judgement: but why?

Today is the end of the Christian year – it's all so confusing; we have the Connexional year starting in September, the tax year, April, the New Year in January – or February if you're Chinese. But this is the turn of the year for the Christian calendar. Advent – next week, begins the cycle again. So, as we close the year, we reflect on what we have achieved – and our hopes for next year. And what hopes we have! So, appropriately, for the end of the year, our readings propel us to the final days – the closing of time. A judgement on those who deny justice. And a time when Christ is – to use the language of the story of the sheep and the goats – is king.

Ezekiel writes of God:

¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. (Ezekiel 34: 16)

Professor Beckford argues from scripture, that God takes the side of the oppressed over the oppressor. In the harassment of this West Indian community in Notting Hill, Beckford's theology is one of hope, for God struggles with and suffers for those who find themselves oppressed.

Ezekiel's vision for his people, suffering now, is of a time when those who seek to protect their interest, will be set aside. There will be a judgement. And I suspect that we have often shied away from themes involving judgment – we're slightly uncomfortable with the language which separates sheep and goats because we want to include everyone. Or is it that we are uncomfortable with the judgment on ourselves? But look; this judgment points us to God's nature. To the oppressed who are harassed: 'I will feed them with justice.'

And in the gospel, we find a story of judgement. Yes, the language may be dualistic – inheriting a kingdom or eternal fire – the righteous and the non-righteous – no grey areas – and we know life is a bit more complicated than that. But the message is quite simple – it's a story that's easy to understand. When it comes to the end of the year – or the end of time as the story imagines – have you been a faithful disciple? Are you able to demonstrate a life lived for Christ? Well, without some measurable benchmark, anyone could argue they'd demonstrated holy living.

This story goes a stage further and defines what being faithful looks like. What a life lived for Christ is. And it is exactly what Robert Beckford saw in the film *Mangrove*. Being faithful looks like God struggling and suffering with the oppressed.

And in the gospel story, the King says:

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, ³⁶ 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. (Matthew 25: 35-36)

In the story – for dramatic purposes – those who indeed have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty and so on, are slightly confused. When did we do this to you, the King? We don't remember.

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. (Matthew 25: 40)

And of course, there are those who have not welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, visited the prisoner, and so on. They are equally confused – they can't remember seeing this King and failing to help him. Had they seen him in this predicament, they would of course have dropped everything.

I 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. (Matthew 25: 43)

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. (Matthew 25: 45)

The gospel story makes a judgement – as does Ezekiel. The judgment of God asks, did you see people who were oppressed – did you do all you could to alleviate their distress? If you did, then you did it also, to Christ.

Lord, when was it that we saw you ...? (Matthew 25: 37)

WLM

The history of the West London Mission is of seeing people who are hungry, thirsty, strangers or in need of clothing, sick or in prison. It is a history of not looking away. But in reaching out to those in various needs, there has been a tradition of empowering people to take ownership of their own futures – in the film, *Mangrove*, Black people took ownership to change their situation.

A few weeks ago, I showed you a video about people in WLM KPH. Some of you said it was helpful to 'see' something of what goes on, however briefly, in a WLM project.

The video I'm about to show you now, is about Burgess Park House. Burgess Park House, houses people who have served in the British military. In the video, listen out for the staff describing why the ex-service men and women arrive at Burgess Park House – what's happened in their lives? What is their 'story' of being hungry, thirsty, in prison and so on? And listen out too, for the positive changes that have happened in their lives.

Video: Burgess Park House – <https://youtu.be/6AYxvVNj1pA>

Thank you to Jamie, Barbara and Zoe.

When was it that we saw you fall through the net, due to relationship breakdown, addiction, or poor mental health?

This is an example of listening and enabling people, who, to coin a phrase, were hungry and thirsty, and empowering them to make positive changes in their lives, such that former service men and women become – well, deep sea divers. That was a surprise! Did we stand with you in your suffering, oppression, challenge? If we did, then we stood alongside Christ in his suffering too.

Conclusion

We hear in God's word, a judgment today. But a judgment based on delivering justice to the oppressed, liberation to those who are captive to a number of social ills. And the judgement falls on us as Christians – as a church. How do we respond?

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. (Matthew 25: 40)

Hymn StF 672: Where can we find you Lord Jesus our Master

1. Where can we find you, Lord Jesus our Master?
We want to serve you, to answer your call.
Where do you lead us and ask us to follow?
What should we do in our service to all?
2. 'Go to the hungry, to those who have nothing;
go where the farmlands are empty and bare.
I broke the bread for the people around me;
out of my plenty, think what you can share.
3. 'Go to the homeless, to those who have nowhere;

go where my people sleep out in the rain.
I had no comforts but what others gave me;
offer them shelter, give ease to their pain.

4. 'Go to the outcast, to those who have no-one;
go where my sheep are rejected and lost.
I dined with sinners and reached out to lepers;
go and do likewise, and don't count the cost.'

5. Where will we find you, Lord Jesus our Master?
We are your servants who answer your call.
You go before us, and there we will follow,
taking our cross in the service of all.

Allan Charles Dickinson (b. 1954)