

TALK BY ANDREW HARRIGAN ON SCRIPTURE AND PRAYER – MATTHEW 25,31-46

Studying Sacred Scripture and praying with Sacred Scripture are closely inter-related and they are both necessary, for God calls us to use the reason and intelligence He has given us to discover more about our faith and how we are to put it into practice in the modern world; it is therefore important that study and prayer each inform and give life to the other.

However, the two are distinct, even though they are not separate from each other and Matthew 25,31-46, known as The Parable of the Last Judgement, lends itself very much to a few moments prayerful reflection.

Matthew has just given us 3 parables about the final judgement of the individual, warning Christians to be prepared for its unforeseeable occurrence. In verses 31-46, we learn the criteria by which this judgement will take place – and they repay careful reflection!

Those who will inherit the Kingdom of God are those who have shown kindly, compassionate and practical love to those in need. The conditions for entry into the Kingdom of Heaven are rather straightforward: 'Have I made it my business to be neighbourly to those who needed a neighbour?' Only such, as far as the Lord Jesus is concerned, are righteous, holy and chosen by God. The theme is one of brotherly love and the terminology of the key phrase in the parable - "I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did it to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me" - is very Matthewan: the importance of the works of brotherly love is stressed constantly throughout his gospel – eg 5,21-48, 12,11-12 and 18,10-35, to mention only a few instances – and the fulfilment of this commandment to – as John's Gospel puts it - "love one another as I have loved you" - now provides the sole criterion by which men and women will be judged at the end of time.

As the great 16th century Carmelite Saint and Doctor of the Church was to put it many centuries later: "In the evening of our lives, we will be judged on love".

No matter how small the gesture, Jesus takes this as being done to Him and at the end of time, all people equally will be judged by the same criterion of love.

It is perhaps startling that, in the eyes of Christ, lack of awareness of the needs of other human beings, or failure to alleviate them, is tantamount to a rejection of Him. But the needs of all, physical and psychological needs, are His needs and to turn away from or reject Christ is always evil. For the Gospel writers, it is really that serious.

Verses 37 and 44 are interesting: both the wicked and the virtuous are surprised, asking: "Lord, when did we see you/fail to see you.....?" But it does not matter whether the righteous see the face of Christ in the needy or that the unrighteous never adverted to the fact that Christ suffers in all who suffer. What matters above all is what, in practice, is done or not done. God is concerned with what I do, or fail to do. The truth is that the whole human race is one family in God, through Jesus Christ and so the human person, each human person, is a sacred temple of God..... and my recognition of that fact is the basis on which I will be judged at the end of time. Although God calls all human beings to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth [1 Tm 2,3-4], I am not saved without my own consent [T Aquinas] and I give that consent by, amongst other things, seeing and loving Christ in others around me; it is only in such a real and active love for others, as St John and St James both teach, that the Kingdom of God comes and such love is the evidence by which humanity will know that it has come in its fullness: by this love, all will know that you are my disciples.

And of course, our prayerful reflections on Matthew's parable can take us into the heart of the

Eucharist, at which we are commanded to “Do this in Memory of Me”. As far as St John is concerned, the heart of the Eucharist, its Institution Narrative, is replaced by the Supreme Act of Christ's love for the Church and for humanity: the Washing of the feet. Our love for Christ and our commitment to living as He lived and loving as He taught us, is shown both by our celebrating the Eucharist and by making that celebration authentic by loving as Jesus loved. That love, the criterion by which Matthew reminds us we will be judged, is shown in concrete action done for others, in Christ, for those that we meet, all those that we meet, are, whether they realise it or not, members of Christ's body.

So, we can go on praying and opening up the Scriptures and seeing how they all fit together and discovering links between them, really, for the rest of our lives. Praying them and studying them go hand in hand but unless our praying and studying results in living in the truth of love, we must remember that our commitment to and profession of Christ, will be found wanting. Let us pray that, by His mercy, we will live in love the faith we profess.

Amen