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Human authority can therefore be a moral obligation only if it is intrinsically in harmony with the authority of God and has a share in this. In this way, the personal dignity of citizens is safeguarded, since their obedience to the public authorities is not the subjection of one man to another but, in its true significance, an act of homage to God, our provident creator, who has decreed that the conditions of social life shall be regulated according to an order he himself has instituted.

Prayers and devotions / from Pope John XXIII. – Burns & Oates, 1967, p.184

Related topics

For further study:

Eschatology; final judgement; heaven; hell; cost of discipleship; evangelisation; mission; human dignity of all persons; the Body of Christ; apostles; paschal mystery

Closing Prayer

Almighty God,
you have conferred upon Christ Jesus
sovereignty over every age and nation.

Direct us, in the love of Christ,
to care for the least of his brothers and sisters,
that we may be subject to his dominion
and receive the inheritance of your kingdom.

Grant this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever.

Opening prayers (ICEL Collects). 1997 · Christ the King, Year A³

³ *Opening prayers : scripture-related collects for the years A, B and C from the sacramentary* / International Commission on English in the Liturgy. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 1999.

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Christ the King

Sunday between 20 and 26 November inclusive

Principal Service readings

Ezekiel 34.11-16, 20-24	God's concern for the House of Israel
Psalms 95.1-7	Praise to our great God
Ephesians 1.15-23	The power and greatness of the Lord Jesus
Matthew 25.31-46	The Last Judgement

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

The judgement

Jesus said to his disciples: ³⁴When 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.’

Matthew 25.31-46 NRSV¹

Comments and Questions

Is this text a parable? is a question pondered over by scholars. It depends on how you define ‘parable’. What is not in doubt is that it is about judgement. At this judgement the Son of Man presides, rewarding some and condemning others.

The structure of the judgement scene is simple but dramatic. The judge and those being judged are introduced (25.31-33), then the judge or king addresses the ‘blessed’ and explains why they have been invited to share in the king’s blessedness (25.34-36). When these people ask for clarification (25.41-43), they are told that the acts of mercy they have performed for ‘one of these least brothers of mine’ they have done for him (25.40). The same sequence is followed for the ‘accursed’: the sentence and the reason for it (25.41-43), the request for clarification (25.44), and the king’s explanation (25.45). The final verse (25.46) summarises the judgement process: the wicked go to everlasting punishment and the righteous to everlasting life.

This judgement scene comes after three parables that are all about preparation for the coming of the Son of Man. In each case everyone knows that the master/bridegroom will come eventually, so they need to be watchful. Some people fail, but the faithful servant, the wise wedding attendants, and the enterprising stewards succeed.

A common interpretation of the judgement scene is that it involves all humanity – ‘all the nations’ (25.32). However, it could be that ‘all the nations’ (*panta ta ethnē*) are ‘all the Gentiles’. If this is the case, then the Gentiles might be judged for their mercy towards Christians, ‘one of the these least brothers of mine’ (25.41), where ‘brothers’ (*adelphoi*)

means ‘disciples of Jesus’. This would mean that a different judgement takes place for the Gentiles.² Further indications of a separate judgement are Matthew 19.28, where the apostles are to judge the twelve tribes of Israel, and Romans 2.9-10, ‘There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek [=Gentile] ...’, and 1 Peter 4.17, ‘For the time has come for judgement to begin with the household of God ...’. Looked at like this, we can see that Matthew might be trying to acknowledge the presence of non-Jews who were not Christians, and explain how and why they can part of God’s kingdom – by their mercy towards Christians. Harrington writes:

the usual response or traditional interpretation deals with the wrong problem: the value of good works for the poor and needy at the final judgement. The right problem is: By what criterion can non-Jews and non-Christians enter God’s kingdom?

Harrington (2007), p.360

Quotations

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The foundation of this power and dignity of Our Lord is rightly indicated by Cyril of Alexandria. “Christ,” he says, “has dominion over all creatures, a dominion not seized by violence nor usurped, but his by essence and by nature.” (*In huc*. x.) His kingship is founded upon the ineffable hypostatic union. From this it follows not only that Christ is to be adored by angels and men, but that to him as man angels and men are subject, and must recognize his empire; by reason of the hypostatic union Christ has power over all creatures. But a thought that must give us even greater joy and consolation is this that Christ is our King by acquired, as well as by natural right, for he is our Redeemer. Would that they who forget what they have cost their Saviour might recall the words: “You were not redeemed with corruptible things, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb unspotted and undefiled.” (1 Peter 1.18-19) We are no longer our own property, for Christ has purchased us “with a great price”; (1 Corinthians 6.20) our very bodies are the “members of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 6.15)

¹ New Revised Standard Version Bible is copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

² *The gospel of Matthew* / Daniel J. Harrington. – Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, 2007. – 978-0-8146-5964-9. – p.358.