

Last Christmas the BBC screened a dramatised version of the birth of Christ. It was a drama with a difference, for 2 reasons. Firstly, it was acted out live on the streets of Liverpool, with a cast of (literally) thousands taking part. It also featured just about every famous Liverpuddlian actor there is – at times it felt more like watching Brookside or The Liver Birds.

But secondly, and more importantly, the play challenged some of our assumptions about Jesus and the world He was born into. The play was faithful to the Christmas story, but for the 21st century. Joseph & Mary were asylum seekers, being moved from place to place; Herod became a government minister obsessed with tracking down anybody, including a new-born baby, who might pose a threat to the status quo; and the angels appeared not to shepherds but to the homeless sleeping on the streets. I spoke to a work colleague shortly after the programme was shown, and she was not impressed. "Fancy suggesting that Jesus' parents would be asylum seekers or that the angels would appear to the homeless" she said. "Why can't they just leave the story the way it was?".

I believe she missed the point – and I think the Liverpool Nativity was making a very important point. It reminded us that Christ didn't come down to mix with the glitterati of society. He was a King, but He didn't have a court. He reigns in glory, but on earth His mission was to all of society – and He started at the bottom.

And if we need proof of this there is no better example than the passage we heard read this morning.

"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

Now the context of this passage is very revealing. Jesus was in the heart of Jerusalem when He said this. He knew there was a plot against Him – He knew that every word He said, every action He performed, every person He spoke to would be watched and analysed by the Jewish authorities. And the outcome of all this was not yet decided – things could still have gone either way. The Jewish authorities knew Jesus had been hailed as a hero when He entered Jerusalem; so if He had chosen to make a few carefully selected diplomatic statements, not upset the apple cart and respect the authority of the temple leaders, they would have accepted Him and left Him alone.

The establishment has always been very good at this – welcoming into the fold those who seem to be a threat; make them feel a part of the elite themselves and they stop being a threat. It is as true today as ever – look how many of yesterday’s rabble-rousing politicians become today’s establishment elite, somehow forgetting many of their principles as they are hypnotised by the trappings of office.

But what does Jesus do? In the heart of Jerusalem He preaches of compassion to the weak and the poor. And worse – He doesn’t just say that giving of yourself to others less fortunate is a nice thing to do if you have the time; He makes it pretty clear what happens if you don’t do as He says:

"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

It’s pretty strong stuff.

One of the great things about the Christian faith is that it challenges us. It’s not meant to be an easy ride; Jesus came to share God’s love for us and to redeem us – but He also came to shake us out of our complacency.

And His visit to Jerusalem is like a microcosm of His whole ministry, both then and now; in Jerusalem some people worshipped Him – others plotted His downfall. Some followed Him – others felt threatened by Him. Some listened when He challenged them about their lives – others asked what right He had to challenge them. Not a lot has changed since.

Jesus could have taken the easy way out. He had multiple opportunities, right from the moment of His entry into Jerusalem up to His appearance before the temple authorities, to compromise, He could have watered down His message, kept the establishment happy, saved His own neck – but in doing so He wouldn’t have saved our necks by dying on the cross.

The thing is, Jesus doesn’t do compromise – and neither must we.

This leads us onto the first of 3 lessons we can learn from this passage, namely that giving of ourselves to others is indivisible from our Christian faith.

The evidence for this is all over the Gospels. When Jesus appointed His disciples, Mark’s Gospel states:

“He appointed twelve — designating them apostles —that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.”

The message is clear – the disciples were there not just to follow Jesus, they were there to preach His word and to heal the sick. Or there is Luke 14:13:

“But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,”

These are not added extras to being a Christian. Jesus did not teach us that giving of ourselves to others is an optional extra. It's not like joining a club, when you can elect to be a full member or an associate member or a 5-day member. The rules are quite clear – though it is convenient for us to forget this.

And giving of ourselves, making use of the talents God has given us for the benefit of others, is not something we choose to leave to others. We were helping recently with the Edinburgh City Mission Care Van when we got talking to one of the men who was drinking the soup we'd brought. I asked him if he had a place to stay that night. “Yes” he replied “but not for much longer”. Why not, I asked. “It's because I keep taking in those who are worse off than me” he said. “The landlord doesn't allow it, so he's told me to leave. But I can't just leave them out on the street – someone took me in when I was on the street, so I have to do the same for them.”

A man who has very little to give, yet who will take in those less fortunate than he – even if it costs him the roof over his own head. I wonder how many of us stand favourable comparison with him?

So Christ calls us to use our gifts and our talents and our hearts to help those around us. And the Bible is quite clear, we are all given gifts to use. Romans tells us:

“We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.”

At no point are we told ‘if you are lucky enough to have a gift, use it to help others’. No – our gifts are given to use first and foremost to put to good use – and in doing so to glorify God.

And that leads us onto the second point. Reading the story of the sheep and the goats it would be easy to say:

“That’s fine, Christianity is all about being nice, helping other people and doing good turns. So if I just do my bit, I’ll be alright.”

And this is what many other religions teach – that it’s all about what you do , and what you are seen to be doing by others. Follow the rules and you will be fine.

But there isn’t any shortcut to salvation with Jesus. Yes, He tells us, we have a duty to give of ourselves, to help others – but these acts are not what saves us. Look at Ephesians:

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Good deeds are not the root of our salvation – but they are the fruit of our salvation. Just like in the pictures the children saw earlier, the apple tree will only be recognised as an apple tree if it is bearing fruit; so it is with those who follow Christ. And if Christians are not bearing the fruits of salvation through Christ, if we are not displaying Christ’s love in everything we do and everything we say, we will not be recognised by others as His followers; and that means we cannot witness to others.

It’s not given to all of us to dedicate our lives to charity work, or to work every day with those less privileged than ourselves. And we can’t just assuage our guilt and buy our way into Christ’s good books with a few charitable donations here & there. But we can let Christ’s love for us – and Christ’s love for the world – guide our every action at home and at work. We can let the love of Christ shine through us – no matter what we are doing.

We and the church can take the lead on issues which are unacceptable to Christians. Imagine if Wilberforce had taken the easy way out and not led the fight against slavery? Imagine if Martin Luther King had valued his own safety above the rights of his race? Whether on major political issues or issues of right and wrong in the community and workplace, Christians have a duty to take the lead and make their voices heard.

Which leads us nicely onto the third lesson of this story – do not take the easy way out. Both in what Jesus said, and in when and where He said it, He was showing that the Christian faith is not about keeping your head down and going with the flow. He went to the very heart of the Jewish faith and society and challenged the leaders. He challenged them by entering into Jerusalem as a king. He challenged them by talking of God’s kingdom on earth. And he challenged them by daring to suggest that they were not on the path to salvation.

Are we brave enough to let the world see our faith? Do we broadcast our faith either by word or by deed? Or do we hide behind the notion that faith is just a private matter between us and God, and that it's not worth letting anyone else know in case we offend them?

If we take that view, we're in direct contradiction to the lesson of the sheep and the goats.

"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me"

Jesus challenges us to a faith in Him which is personal in our commitment, but public in our acts. He challenges us to commit our lives to Him, and to show His love to world in everything we do. He challenges us to show His compassion through the gifts He has given us. And he challenges us to make a stand for Him in our words and our actions.

It's a big ask, but if we're going to be worthy of the name 'Christian', it's one we have to meet. There is nothing less expected of us.

"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in."

Let's pray.

Father, we pray that we may heed your call to let our faith in you shine out like a beacon to all the world. Give us the strength and the wisdom to use the gifts you have given us in your name, that all the world may see the fruits of your spirit.

Amen