

Sermon: One of the Least of These

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, on Nov. 26, 2023)

There is this little known Netflix original TV series, call the “Messiah”. It came out in 2020, 10 episodes in all during the first season. The second season has yet to come out, not sure if it is cancelled due to low viewership, or suspended due to the pandemic. When it comes to Netflix, it really is hit-and-miss, a bit of mystery. Anyway, this fictional show sets in the present day, is fascinating to me. It follows the mysterious appearance of a solitary figure, a Middle-Eastern man with a long flowing hair, with piercing eyes and calming smile. He appeared in Syria, right before an armoured column of the ISIS militias was about to descend upon Damascus. Standing on an elevated platform, he urged the residents of the capital city to remain clam, as ISIS, he predicted, is on the final leg of its power, for its militias will not entered into Damascus. His prophetic uttering would soon be followed by a massive sandstorm, on an apocalyptic scale that literally buried the invaders over the following weeks. Consequently, he would soon be given a name: el-Messi (or the Messiah in Arabic).

Episode by episode, the show would follow el-Messi to Palestine, Israel, and the United States, while focusing on the reactions of his followers, both protagonists and antagonists, to this messianic, Jesus-like figure. The show is fascinating to me because it imagines what would it be like if Jesus were really to appear, again, in the 21 century. Would we recognize him? Would we acknowledge him? Would we worship him? Or would we dissect him through the machinery of international politics, discredit him through social media, and finally dishonoured him through half-faith that looks more and more like folly repackaged? Will the second coming of Jesus Christ truly meet our expectation, that every knee shall bow, every tongue shall confess that Jesus is Lord?

Sisters and brothers in Christ, today is the last Sunday of the Christian calendar, traditionally celebrated as ‘Christ the King’ Sunday. The Scriptural passage read earlier, of Matthew 25, contains only the briefest description of the so-called second coming of Jesus, in verse 31, *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him...”*

Some have interpreted the word ‘nations’ as individual countries, like China, Russia, Brazil and so on, postulating that it is the conduct of each

country that will come under judgement. That would be a mistake, because the Greek word used for nations is *'ethnee'*, denoting multiplicity of race and people as distinct from Israel. It is people that is being judged, not countries. Some commentators maintain that the use of *'ethnee'* precludes the covenantal community. Essentially saying the people of God (whether Israel or the Church) are exempt from the subsequent judgement. That would be another mistake, for *'ethnee'* when used in prophetic literature takes on an all-encompassing nature. Take for example Jeremiah, when he was first called by the Lord, God said to the prophet, in Jeremiah 1:5, *"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."* God was not appointing Jeremiah as prophet only to nations outside of Israel, but as prophet to all groups, all race, and all people. As we read also that Jeremiah concentrated his prophetic activities in and around Jerusalem. His primary hearers were kings and courts of the Judean elites.

Coming back to the parable of Jesus, when that gathering of all people occurs, one thing we know is that there will be no mistaking the Son of Man in his glory. This is not Jesus of Nazareth, the son of a carpenter, living in Galilee where nothing good ever comes out of. This is not el-Messi of Netflix, speaking cryptic riddles, showing off a miracle or two, like walking on water across the pond in front of the Washington Monument.

The Son of Man in his glory was prophesied in Daniel 7, as coming with clouds of heaven, accompanying by thousands and upon thousands of heavenly host, and was given by the Ancient of Day an everlasting dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. There will be no mistaking this gathering before the Son of Man seated on the judgement throne. And Matthew informs us in verse 32, that *"he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left."*

This separation of sheep from goats would not have been a surprise to the original hearers in the time of Jesus. For the Book of Ezekiel prescribes just that in chapter 34. In that context, God is the True Shepherd who is coming to rescue his flock from the hands of false and corrupt shepherds, that is the ruling class of Israel and Judah, the kings, priests and false prophets. For they have feed on the good pasture at the expense of others, and they have muddied the clear water with no regard to those who come after. I resonate particularly with this description in verse 21,

“Because you pushed with flank and shoulder and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide.” An apt reminder for those leaders, civil or religious, of what not to do with the powers assigned to them. In response, God the True Shepherd will save the flock from being ravaged, and the Lord will judge also between sheep and goat. In such a context, separation is a necessity, and judgement naturally follows after.

If such a separation of sheep from goats comes as no surprise, what is surprising in this parable of Jesus is the criteria used. For the king, that is the Son of Man in his full glory, will say to those at his right hand, presumedly the sheep, the good flock, in verse 34-36 *“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for 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, 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.”* Furthermore, he will say to those at his left hand, presumedly the wicked goat, using the same criteria, in verse 41-43, *“You who are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels, for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 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.”*

Note the response from both group is the same, of being surprised, utterly perplexed, saying, *“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prisoner?”* To that the king will reply, *“Truly I tell you, just as you did it (or did not) to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it (or did not) to me.”*

To be sure, this criteria of **‘one of the least of these’** is inextricably bound to the Matthew’s understanding of who Christ is. We see this reflected in the titles of Jesus throughout the Gospel. As the Son of Man, or as commentators have rephrase it the ‘Son of humanity’, Jesus is the one who is to come (Matthew 10:23), he give his life as a ransom for many (20:28). As Shepherd, he has compassion for many who are like sheep without a shepherd (9:36), and he searches and rescues the single stray sheep (18:12). As King, Jesus stands in the line of David (2:1-3). As Lord, and he has God-like power to heal, to cast out unclean spirit (8:2). The one who separates sheep from goats is none other than this Shepherd, Lord and King, crucified and raised, who now sits on the right hand side of the

God, and is given the authority to judge as well as forgive. Alleluia, praise be to his name, Jesus the Christ, anointed, sanctified and glorified.

The criteria used for separation by this glorified Christ is not the Torah, as in the Ten Commandments and all the 613 ordinances, rules and regulations. It is not the Shema, as "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. It is not 'justification by faith' as taught by the Apostle Paul in Romans 3:28. It is not whether one tithes, or observes sabbath, or saying a short prayer before meal. These are all good things and should be practiced diligently by people of faith.

The criteria used for separation is '**one of the least of these**'. It is foremost a call to recognize Jesus in the faces of others who may look different, speak a different language, or think in different ways. It is a call to acknowledge Jesus in the lives of others who struggle with lack of housing, or putting food on the table, or have suffered in ways we cannot comprehend. It is a call to serve Jesus by responding to sufferings we see all around us, with simple and practical steps: feed the hungry, quench the thirsty, welcome a stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned.

One of the more memorable conversations I have had, was with a homeless person in downtown Toronto years ago, when I was a youth leader organizing a Sandwich Run, where we made and delivered packages of sandwich, snacks, drink to those without shelters. In one conversation, I sat down on the street with a gentleman, in his 40s but looking quite battered by exposure to elements. I learned of his previous life, as an engineer, married, with a house. I learned of his mental health challenge, his marital breakdown, losing his house and ending up on the street. I learned also of his most prized possession, a beat-up bicycle beside him, for it was his lifeline, how he could work as a delivery person, and earned a meagre living with dignity. I wouldn't go as far as saying 'I saw Jesus in him'. But since that conversation, I would never walk by another homeless beggar on the street without at least making eye contact with him or her, sometimes I would even sit with them and pray for them. I may not be able to solve their problems, but at least I acknowledge their existence, as my neighbours, as one of the least of these.

In the name of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**