

MATTHEW 25:31-46  
HOW CAN I MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Martin was a shoemaker in a Russian folk-tale told by Leo Tolstoy. Martin lived in a little village in Russia and he cared for the shoes of the people in his village. He was also a devout man who read his bible. One night, he had been reading his bible when he went to bed and then fell asleep. He dreamed that Jesus came to him and promised that He would come to visit Martin the following day. Martin got up early and tidied the house ready for his special visitor and began to look out for him; he put some soup on the stove to be ready. As he looked out he saw the street-sweeper coming along, an old man, sweeping away the snow; he looked very cold, so Martin called him in and gave him a cup of tea to warm him up; then he went on his way.

Next to come along was a woman with a baby wrapped in her very thin shawl; she also has very thin shoes and the shawl barely covered her and her child; she shivered in the cold as she leaned against the wall of Martin's house. He called to her to come in and get warm and he went off into the backroom to bring her a worn-out cloak; it was worn but it was thicker than anything she had. He gave her the cloak and some soup and off she went. Next to come along to the shop was little girl for whom Martin had been making some special shoes; she had one leg shorter than the other and he was making her a pair of shoes so that she could walk without anyone knowing of her disability. She was delighted with her new shoes and off she went dancing home.

Martin heard a commotion outside; maybe this was his special visitor with a crowd. He looked out but all he saw was an old woman from the market dragging a boy along by his ear. "What's the matter?" Martin asked. "He stole an apple from my stall and I'm taking him to police! Thief." He brought the old woman and the boy inside and suggested to the woman that there was a better way than having the boy put into jail; she could show him a better way by forgiving him; he told the boy that it is wrong to steal. It was dark outside by now and Martin realised that any special visitor would not come today!

At bedtime, he took his bible down from the shelf and opened it to read the next piece. When he opened it he read: "*I was hungry...*" (Matthew 25:35) "*I tell...*" (Matthew 25:40) Martin realised that his special visitor had come, though not as he had expected; he understood that in caring for an old street sweeper, a poor mother and child, a disabled girl, an old woman and a thieving boy, his special visitor had come. In doing what he did for these people, he had served Jesus. This folk-tale, told by Tolstoy, captures something of Jesus' story and shows something of the open-heartedness and the open-handedness that Jesus wants to see in us.

What is the most uncomfortable part of our Bible reading this morning? Is it these words from Jesus about sheep and goats? They are powerful words and they make us uncomfortable. Why? Because they speak about judgement? The Son of Man comes as judge – not a terribly popular notion nowadays, this idea of judgement and someone deciding that one person is better than, or even different from, another. Lots of people are uncomfortable with that notion! Or is it idea that some will be judged in one way and some judged in another that leaves us uncomfortable? We don't like that idea of people being treated differently; it makes us uncomfortable! Or is it the criterion by which Jesus is seen to judge, about caring for people in need? Is that what makes us uncomfortable because we know it is such a challenge that we find it almost too much for us to achieve? What questions do we want to ask of this passage?

Jesus paints a picture – this is what it will be like "*When Son...*" (Matthew 25:31) We're not in the world of parables anymore; this is reality; it is not a very comfortable reality, but this is what it will be like when Jesus comes as King in His glory. He begins to describe a judgement scene, with people being separated, some on his right, some on his left; some will be blessed

by King Jesus, others will be cursed. This is not “gentle Jesus meek and mild”; this is Jesus the King exercising His authority. It is strange: we don’t like the idea of judgement like this; it sits uneasily with our tolerant way of thinking; it makes us uncomfortable. But on the other hand there is a built-in sense of fairness and justice to the human spirit – we like people who do good things to be rewarded and people to be bad and do wrong to be punished; that is the very foundation of our legal system and our society. How do we hold all of that together?

This is the criterion by which King Jesus exercises judgement: “*I was...*” (*Matthew 25:35f*) Have you heard about the mass sleepout on December 9<sup>th</sup> in Princes Street Gardens? Some of you may have signed up. Why is that 9000 people have signed up for this event? Bethany Trust have been doing this kind of sleepout for years with only 300-400 people. Is it because there are famous people coming: Liam Gallacher will be busking, Bob Geldof, Richard Branson. Now, I’m not decrying this, I’m just using it as an example. When we do things for famous people, that’s one thing; how about doing the same for people we’ve never heard of? Jesus said “You have done this for me”: if they had done it for Jesus in person they would have known and gone home saying, “you’ll never guess who I met today?” But the criterion which Jesus uses is that we do this for people who are poor, hungry, homeless, strangers, in prison, not famous people, but people in need.

How open is our heart? How wide are our arms? You might have heard over the last couple of weeks or so that Prime Minister of Lebanon has been visiting places in Europe; he was the guest of President Macron in Paris. This person who holds high office has been made welcome on his tour and rightly so. But what happens when some of the refugees from Lebanon try to come into Europe to make a home? Either they are refused entry or life is made very hard for them. I know the issues are different and it is far more complicated than this but I use that as an example of our attitudes: we seem to be happy to welcome celebrities and famous people, but “ordinary” people so often go unnoticed. Our hearts are open and our arms wide for people who are rich and famous, but are they as open for those who are poor and hungry? Sometimes our standards are different.

We’ve just filled 171 shoeboxes and sent them to Blythswood. That is brilliant! It is so good! Why did you involve yourself in that appeal? 2 weeks today is our Gift service in partnership with the Salvation Army, with gifts for children in families who are poor in this city. Why will you be involved in that Gift service by bringing a present? We don’t know where our shoeboxes will go; we don’t know the name of the town or village to which they will be sent; we don’t know the names of the people who will open a box that I filled. We don’t know the names of the families who will get our Christmas presents after they leave here on December 10<sup>th</sup>. For me, that’s exactly the point: we give in these ways to give to people who are not famous, but who are poor; we give to people who are poor because that’s what Jesus wants us to do. He wants us to be open-hearted and open-armed to people in need no matter who they are or where we find them.

“Christians shouldn’t just be pulling people out of the river. We should be going upstream to find out who’s pushing them in.” (Desmond Tutu) We’re good at caring for wounded people, people who are poor, giving food to food banks, sending shoeboxes to Eastern Europe. We’re not so good at campaigning to change the root causes of poverty across the world. But this is another way of opening our hearts and arms to care for people in need, to make sure that people in power make laws that address the causes of poverty and need in our society. We can be the voice for those who have little voice of their own.

Why do we open our hearts to people who are poor? Why do we open our arms to embrace and welcome people in need? Because Jesus has done exactly that for us! “*We love...*” (*1 John 4:19*) The pattern of love is His practical Calvary-style love for us and because He has loved us, we are inspired to love other people, to love and care for one another within the community of the church that we know, to love and care for people who live next door to us

and in our street, to love and care for people across the world whom we have never met and whose names we will never know. This is not a point-scoring exercise; this is about love living in our hearts, our love for Jesus and our love for other people being exercised in practical, caring ways.

What does Jesus look for in us? Here is one very clear answer to that question. It leaves us with lots of questions; it makes us uncomfortable at times, perhaps because it is so clear. What does Jesus look for in His people? He looks for us to be open-hearted and to have arms stretched wide open to love and care for people in need. "*When I...*" (*Matthew 25:35f*) "*Whenever...*" (*Matthew 25:40*) Is this us? Are we these people who care, who are inspired to love others because Jesus loved us first?