

Judging Nations

A sermon on Matthew 25:31-46 by Nathan Nettleton, 26 November 2017

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Message

God has created a world that becomes healthy, free and full of life when its nations honour and care for the most vulnerable. Nations that fail to build cultures of compassion and care are doomed to destroy themselves.

Sermon

One of the many bits of utter nonsense that was heard from the advocates of a no vote in the recent marriage equality vote was that Australia is a Christian nation and that it is built on Christian values. You could probably be on either side of the marriage equality debate and still recognise this for the rubbish that it is. I think I have sometimes been known to argue that there is no such thing as a Christian nation, only Christian people, but I may have to repent of that view in light of the gospel reading we heard tonight.

The idea that there is no such thing as a Christian nation has been common among Baptists ever since the reformation, because at that time it seemed to our forebears that those claiming that their nations were Catholic or Protestant were simply carving up territory and forging political alliances between church and state. Our Baptist forebears, by contrast, were arguing that no one is Christian because of where they live, but because they personally follow in the footsteps of Jesus and shape their life around his values.

Although that is essentially true, the problem is that it has often led to a very individualistic way of thinking, and so we've seen many Christians argue that God is only concerned with the personal behaviour and morality of individuals, and that politics and the social policies of nations are not things that the followers of Jesus need to think about. Of course the exception is made when national policy relates to personal morality as happened recently.

But tonight we get to the end of our twelve month journey through the gospel according to Matthew, and over and over we have heard Matthew emphasising the idea that Jesus has come to inaugurate a new kingdom, or a new culture, and the concept of a kingdom is inescapably political. Tonight, this final piece of teaching from Jesus in this gospel portrays Jesus as a king who now reigns over all the nations, and who sits in judgement over the nations. It is often overlooked, but this dividing up of the sheep and the goats is not portrayed as a dividing up of individual people, but of nations.

So if Jesus is judging nations according to their living out of his values in their national social life, then in that sense, it is clearly possible to describe nations as more or less Christian. So what is Jesus looking for in our nations? What are the values Jesus wants to see taking flesh in our culture, in our national policy?

Well Jesus's answer is crystal clear here. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus's teaching ministry is bookended with two major statements of values. His first sermon in this gospel begins with the beatitudes. "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of God. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are those who are persecuted for doing right, for theirs is the kingdom of God." It is a catalogue of vulnerable people and an affirmation that they are at the heart of God's agenda.

And tonight we heard his last sermon, and guess what? It expresses the same set of values, but this time expressed as a set of judgements on the life and behaviour of the nations.

There are many Christians who would still want to deny this and argue that it is only individuals who are judged, but they will have trouble wriggling out of what Jesus teaches here. Because those same Christians usually want to argue that individuals are judged by what they believe and whether or not they have made a decision to accept Jesus as their personal Lord and saviour, and that is absolutely not the picture of judgement that Jesus paints here. So they can't have it both ways. Either Jesus judges nations too, according to the values described in this story, or they are wrong about the judgement completely. If you take this story seriously as Jesus tells it, it kills off any idea that Jesus is not interested in the politics and social policies of nations.

Judging nations is something we do all the time. People are always looking around the world and comparing other nations to their own, either favourably or disparagingly. We are always pretty keen to see our own nation, state or city as being superior to others. But when it comes to judging nations, what are the measures we usually employ? Is it not usually measures of power, wealth and influence? Economic growth, gross domestic product, balance of trade, military spending and power, household living standards. If you ask most people a generic undefined question like which are the top few nations in the world, they will usually list the nations with the most money and the most global power.

Just look at how differently Jesus judges the nations. Jesus tells us that he judges the nations based on their treatment of four key groups of people: the poor, the foreigners and refugees, the sick, and the prisoners. And I put it too you that, far from proving itself as a Christian nation, our nation would be quaking in its boots if it understood what Jesus was saying here and knew that it was being judged by its treatment of these groups.

For I was poor, says Jesus. I was homeless. For years I'd been living in what they called 'last resort housing', seedy boarding houses and the like, but one by one those places had been closing down as their inner-city locations became popular renovators' paradises. When they closed down the Gatwick Hotel and sold it to a reality TV show, I ended up on the streets, sleeping on a couple of old blankets in the doorway of a city building. And although the loss of low-income housing had been apparent for years, your nation had done next to nothing to boost public housing or properly managed transitional housing. The need was way more than the supply. And the proven solutions from elsewhere were deemed too politically risky. So you, Australia, stepped around me and left me lying in the doorway.

For I was a refugee, says Jesus. I fled the horrific war in my country, escaping with almost nothing, and I came seeking asylum from you, Australia. But you portrayed me as a queue jumper, an economic pariah, a threat to your national values, and even as a potential terrorist. You shipped me off to your underdeveloped neighbours and paid them to lock me up in concentration camp conditions as a deterrent to anyone else who might seek asylum in your land. And when that country concluded that what you had asked them to do to me was inhumane and illegal, and they closed down the camp, you turned off the power and the water and left me terrified, surrounded by hostile locals, and you threatened New Zealand with diplomatic consequences if they stepped in and offered me a safe home.

For I was sick, says Jesus. My mind was a mess and I struggled with depression and self-harm after years of misguided attempts to reverse my same-sex attraction. I was filled with self-loathing and frequently on the brink of suicide. And you decided to hold a drawn out public debate about whether treating people like me as normal and acceptable would destroy families and disadvantage children and make the school football team want to wear dresses everyday instead of just on mad muck-up Monday. And even when your people overwhelmingly rejected your fear-mongering and said I was okay, your politicians went straight back to debating whether they could legalise a whole bunch of new discriminations against people like me. One day of dancing in the streets was nice, but now I'm back in a psych ward.

For I was a prisoner, says Jesus. I was fifteen years old, and I'd never had a positive role model in my life. I'd been arrested numerous times for a string of offences committed while trying to survive and fit in with the only peer group I had, and I ended up in Don Dale. 94% of us in there were indigenous kids, and the system was intent on breaking us rather than rehabilitating us. Isolation cells, tear gas, and pitting us against one another in violent fights as punishment and entertainment for the warders. You, Australia, left me sitting there, strapped in a restraint chair with a spit hood over my head while you debated which recommendations of your Royal Commission you could afford to implement.

When you did these things to the least and most vulnerable of these, who I love, you were doing them to me. You didn't recognise me, but that was me.

And some of our politicians and church leaders have the gall to suggest that we live in a Christian nation, founded on Christian values. We certainly don't live in a nation that can hold its head high when the New Human sits on his throne and calls the nations to judgement for how they have lived out his values in their treatment of the most vulnerable: the poor, the refugees, the sick, and the prisoners.

Of course, we could add in the other vulnerable group of whom Jesus says elsewhere that our treatment of them is our treatment of him, and that's the children. We've had another Royal Commission showing us how appallingly our nation and our churches have done there too.

Here's the thing. God's values, revealed to us most clearly in the life and teaching of Jesus, are radically at odds with the values of a world that is obsessed with getting all the money, sex and power it can. But it is God's values that are woven into the fabric of creation. God has created the world to flourish and prosper and become healthy and full of life when nations and communities structure their life around care for the most vulnerable.

Focussing our care on the most vulnerable is not about vengefully turning the tables and disadvantaging others. It is about ensuring that the care and compassion we would want for ourselves is extended to everyone, including those who we know are most prone to falling through the cracks and missing out.

Last Sunday, this congregation voted to adopt a "Safe Church" policy that focuses on making sure that our church is a safe, welcoming and inclusive place for people who have often been overlooked or even discriminated against and abused in church: children, indigenous people, LGBT+ people, people with disabilities, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, etc. And I don't think anyone would seriously say that healthy, educated, straight, white blokes like

me have been disadvantaged by these endeavours. On the contrary, our lives too have been enriched as the social fabric of our community has been enriched. Because that is the way we and our world were created to work best.

When our nations don't function that way, when we neglect and abuse our most vulnerable people, our communities begin breaking down, and we all pay the price. Our communities begin to fragment into hostile factions, alienated from one another and competing against one another for a fair go.

That's actually what is being talked about when Jesus dismisses these nations and says that they will end up in the time of fire prepared for the devil and his angels. He is not saying that God is intent on punishing people or nations that don't measure up. He is saying that they have created their own punishment by their own actions. That they will reap what they sow. That they will end up lying in the bed they have made for themselves. If you create a fractured unhealthy world, you doom yourself to live in it. Patterns and policies of injustice light fires that nations like ours end up being burnt by. You don't have to look very hard to see the truth of that.

But given that this fierce judgement is a judgement of our nations, not of us as individual people, what are we as a group of individuals supposed to do about it? How can we respond? We will be exploring some of the answers to those questions in more detail over the next few weeks as the season of Advent calls us to stand on tiptoes and peer towards the horizon and prepare ourselves for the new culture of God that is approaching and has drawn near in Jesus.

But for now, let me just say that we begin by living out these values in our individual lives and in the small communities that we are involved in, because our nation is made up of people and smaller communities. Things like the policy we adopted last week are important, but far more important is how we live them out. Our living out of the new culture of God will not immediately rewrite the culture or policies of our nation, but they will be a witness and a proving ground for the kind of change that can heal our nation and its various peoples.

This is certainly not about whether or not you should give a fiver to the next homeless person you see begging in the street. If we take Jesus at his word here and recognise him in the beggar on the street, you are not going to chuck Jesus a fiver and otherwise ignore him, are you? Token charitable acts are still worth doing, but they are not going to rewrite our culture and heal our nation.

The challenge is to learn to recognise all people as icons of Jesus, and to treat people with the honour and care with which we would treat Jesus himself. You and I are not ultimately responsible for the culture and policies of our nation. But we are responsible for how we treat one another here in this community. And it is as we learn to honour one another here, and to work at creating a little pocket of alternative culture here in which the most vulnerable are honoured as the face of Jesus among us that we will begin to taste the culture of heaven, full of life and love and health, and to shine a light of hope that the nation can learn from and respond to.