

2nd November, 2014.

Reading: Matthew 25: 31 - 46

Sermon: The Challenge to Reach Out

A friend of mine was on holiday at Loch Rannoch recently with her husband. She was telling me the other day that on one of the days she was there the rain was torrential and so she and her husband decided to drive to somewhere for lunch.

As they were going along the road in the middle of nowhere, there was a man standing at the side of the road trying to hitch a lift. The rain was battering down so they stopped the car and picked him up. He was slightly inebriated but he was trying to get to Pitlochry for appointments. Despite the fact that they weren't actually going there, my friends decided that they would just head to Pitlochry

with the man, drop him off and thereafter go and get their lunch.

I was horrified. I said to her: You picked up a complete stranger in the middle of nowhere. She said in response: It was pouring. I couldn't just have left him there.

I was a stranger and you invited me in.

I ended up with a stranger in my home for lunch about three years ago, someone I would have considered to be safe. It created difficulties for me on the day but it also resulted in me having to provide the police with a statement following a serious incident elsewhere.

I was a stranger and you invited me in. I was hungry and you gave me something to eat.

In the first situation, the one in which my

friends found themselves, it all worked out well. In the situation in which I found myself, it didn't work out particularly well although it could have been a whole lot worse.

The parable, which Jesus cites, is one of the simplest if not the simplest which he tells. There are others, which need to be explained or worked out, but this one is incredibly straightforward.

What this parable tells us is that one day we will be judged, not on how much money we had, not on how famous we became, not on what position of authority we held, not on how much knowledge we had, which is a great comfort to me after the Quiz Night.

What we will be judged on is the help we have given and as Willie Barclay says in his commentary, there are two things which this

parable teaches us about the help we must give.

Firstly, we must help with the simple things in life and the things which are specifically mentioned are giving someone who is hungry a meal, giving someone who is thirsty a drink, welcoming a stranger, brightening up the day for someone who is sick and visiting the prisoner.

These are things which anyone can do. It's not a question of giving away thousands of pounds, or of writing our names in the annals of history. It is simply about giving help to the people we meet every day and we can all do that.

Willie Barclay says, there never was a parable which so opened the way to glory to the simplest people, but this parable is not

about earning our salvation. The action, which is called for, will be a natural response to the gift of salvation and of life and of hope and of peace, which we have received from Christ himself. We should be able to do no other.

Willie Barclay also says, about the help that we receive, that it must be help which is uncalculating. In the parable, those who helped the hungry man, the thirsty woman, the sick and the prisoner, those who welcomed the stranger, were not doing so to earn Brownie points.

They were not doing so because they believed they were helping Christ himself. They helped because they couldn't stop themselves, a bit like my friend in the Loch Rannoch area. The help the people in the parable offered was instinctive and natural. It was the uncalculating

reaction of a loving heart.

But there was another group of people. There was the group which failed to help those in need and their reaction to Christ's words was basically: 'If we had known it was you, we would have gladly helped. We thought it was just some common man who was not worth helping.'

Are we like that? Do we help only those we consider to be the right people or deserving people and ignore the rest?

Willie Barclay confronts us with the truth that if we withhold help from those who really need it, and offer it only to those we think deserve it, then we are withholding help from Christ himself.

As has often been said before, we are Jesus' hands and feet. Who did He help? Mary

Magdalene, the leper, the tax collector, the demon possessed who may well be those whom we now consider to be mentally ill.

He helped those who were desperate and who were by and large rejected by society although He never turned his back on anyone who was in need. Some just found his help harder to accept than others, the rich man, for example.

Go and sell what you have and give it to the poor and he couldn't do it. Jesus wasn't against wealth but he wanted the rich man to consider what mattered most to him, following Jesus or his bankbook. His challenge to the rich man was about priorities.

What matters most to us? Again I ask: Do we only reach out to certain people and avoid others?

Willie Barclay cites two people who reached out to people the world would have ignored in their day.

The first was Francis of Asissi. Barclay says Francis of Asissi was wealthy, high born and high spirited but he was not happy. He felt that life was incomplete. Then one day he was out riding and met a leper who was despised and repulsive due to the disease which was eating away at him. Something moved Francis to get off his horse and fling his arms around this wretched man. As he did so, the face of the leper changed to the face of Christ.

The second person cited by Willie Barclay was Martin of Tours. He was a Roman soldier and a Christian. One cold winter day, as he was entering a city, a beggar stopped him and asked for alms.

Martin had no money but the beggar was blue and shivering with the cold so Martin gave him what he had. He took off his soldier's coat, worn and frayed as it was. He cut it in two and gave half of it to the beggar.

That night he had a dream. In it he saw heaven, the angels and in the midst of them, Jesus, wearing half a Roman soldier's cloak. One of the angels said to him, 'Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak? Who gave it to you?' And Jesus answered softly, 'My servant, Martin, gave it to me.'

Two stories of people who simply reached out for no reward and received a blessing from God.

It has to be said that if we look for reward or results from our efforts, we may well be disappointed. If we look for thanks, again we

may well be disappointed.

Having said that, we often find that when we reach out to someone else to try and help them, the unexpected happens, namely that we receive back from that person more than we give. We often find that we are on the receiving end of a blessing we couldn't have imagined.

We see in this parable that as servants of God, we are asked only to reach out. Someone who did that was Bishop Oscar Romero who was gunned down in his Cathedral as he served Mass in 1980.

Oscar Romero was a man who reached out to the poor. He spoke out against poverty, against social injustice, against assassinations and torture, particularly after the assassination of one of his friends who was also a priest. The

death of his fellow priest convinced him that he had to walk the same path.

Romero was under no illusions. He did not expect to see huge returns for his efforts but his efforts are not to be underestimated.

What Romero said was this: We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realising that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that

is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

These are words that most of us need to hear, especially if we are becoming disheartened at the poor yield, if I can put it that way. We may never see the fruits of our labours. When the harvest will happen is not ours to know. We are simply called to help on the journey, to reach out to those we meet and to make a difference, however small, in the lives of individuals.

Jesus reached out to us even from the cross. When we look at Romero's life, we see the potential cost of love, the potential cost of caring, the potential cost of reaching out.

As we approach the table we see the cost of love to Jesus. We see the cost of caring to

Jesus and we see the cost of reaching out. Are we prepared to reach out despite the risks? Are we prepared to reach out in the service of the one who gave everything for us?