

SERMON - PASTOR GREG
26.11.2023

ARE YOU READY? Let us pray. In Matthew 24:3 we hear: *As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately. "Tell us", they said, "When will this happen and what will be the sign of your coming at the end of the Age?"*

In response Jesus said variously: *"Watch out that no one deceives you- for many will come claiming to be me...There will be wars, famines, earthquakes and persecution of Christians. There will be a great falling away in the Church. False prophets will abound. There will be an increase of wickedness and the love of many will grow cold.*

Then Jesus says: *"But the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.*

And: *Heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away.* Repeating the words of God in Isaiah 40:8: *The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.* The words of Jesus are the words of God and as God is eternal- so is His word.

And: *Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.*

Then Jesus gave four stories or parables to challenge us and they all have terrible endings: *24:51: (The master of the house) will cut the (wicked servant) to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be a weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

25:12: But the bridegroom said to (the five foolish virgins), "I tell you the truth, I don't know you." And the door remained shut.

25:30: The parable of the Ten Talents: Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

And from today's reading: *When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.*

Judgement Day. Righting wrongs. Delivering the verdict. Freed for ever or enslaved forever. And what is the basis for this separation? *Feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, inviting the stranger in, clothing the poor, caring for the sick and visiting those in prison.* In other words: GOOD WORKS.

In October next year our church will gather in National Synod in Adelaide. We do every three years- it is like an AGM. We will discuss many things and of course once again we will discuss the ordination of women. I think it might be the fifth time that we will focus our attention on this matter. But for me it has never just been about the ordination of women. There is much more at stake. The ordination matter raises questions about human sexuality, the authority of the Word of God, the challenge of culture and indeed the very gospel of Jesus Christ.

I started studying at Luther Seminary in 1992. In my very first year I was challenged by all of this. In some conversations the phrases CHRISTO-CENTRIC UNIVERSALISM and THEO-CENTRIC PLURALISM were raised.

CHRISTO-CENTRIC UNIVERSALISM: Jesus Christ died for all people and so all people are saved- no matter what or who they believe in.

THEO-CENTRIC PLURALISM: God is the centre of all religions so again it does not matter what or who is believed in.

I asked the question: 'If all people are going to be saved then why be a pastor?' The answer was: 'Everyone needs to know now that God loves them and accepts them- as they are.' Both of these views end up concentrating on SOCIAL JUSTICE- caring for the oppressed, the poor, the marginalised and those rejected by the mainstream society.

Our church is beset by these challenges. We are divided upon the matter of ordination. We are divided upon the matter of human sexuality. And we are becoming increasingly divided over the exclusive claims of Christianity.

In recent times the Lutheran magazine has had two stories: A Lutheran School in country SA celebrated a Hindu religious festival because many of their students are of the Hindu faith. And the latest Lutheran magazine has an article on an Aboriginal lady in Hopevale- who I personally know. In her story she recounts how she seeks advice and protection from the ancestral spirits.

And there is another challenge in all of this. Both Universalism and Pluralism speak of doing good things- righting the wrongs of our culture/society/history. In other words: GOOD WORKS. But how many good works do we have to do? What are the good works that we have to do? What happens if we don't do them? Is there a heaven and is there a hell? Is there any need for a saviour at all?

I could list off verse after verse which proclaims the Gospel which most of you have heard every time you have worshipped in this place. But for today, a few verses from the Gospel of John: *I tell you the truth, no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born again of water and the Spirit...I AM the Bread of life...I AM the Light of the world...I AM the Resurrection and the Life...I AM the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* And maybe- yes- definitely Ephesians- *it is by grace you have been saved- through faith- and this not from yourselves it is the gift of God.*

But what about Judgement Day? What about caring for the hungry, the thirsty, the poor, the sick and those in prison? All these a right and good and holy and proper works for us to do but they are the fruit of our faith- *they are the works that God has prepared for us to do (Eph 2:10).* The Reformation cries out like the bell of this church: We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Always and for ever.

Our faith, our church, our lives centre on the Person of Jesus Christ and his word. If he is not who the Bible proclaims him to be then we are left to ourselves- to do what we think best. But if Jesus is who the Bible proclaims him to be and we believe this- then our past, present and future are safe, clean and holy. And we will live forever in the house of God. Amen.