

May my words be in the Name of our God,
+Loving Creator,
Compassionate Christ and
Healing Spirit. **Amen** **(please be seated)**

One of my favourite TV shows of all time is The Golden Girls, a comedy from the 1980's about 4 women, aged over 55 sharing a house in Miami. When I think of some of the classic one-liners, I still giggle. In one particular scene, a snobbish writer talks down to Blanche and Rose, 2 of the main characters, when explaining how she often writes metaphorically – “Do you know what that means, Blanche?” In her usual Southern Belle style, Blanche responds calmly, “I know what a metaphor is honey, I’m not a dummy”, to which Rose innocently asks: “Blanche, what’s a metaphor?”

To answer Rose’s question using a VERY simple definition, a metaphor is when you use a word/phrase/object to mean something else.

In our Gospel passage today, there are a number of possible instances of metaphors, but before we explore this further, let’s consider the setting of this passage.

For the last few Sunday’s, we have been hearing parables from Matthew’s Gospel, parables like the talents of 10, 5, and 1 being given out last week, and 2 weeks ago, the 10 bridesmaids, some wise and some foolish, with their lamps and oil. But our Gospel story today is DIFFERENT.

It is NOT a parable, but an apocalyptic drama – it begins with a depiction of the coming of the Son of Man with his angels and the gathering of all nations before his throne. Very dramatic. Why? Because Jesus illustrates how to be a proper disciple. Look at the list of feelings and actions: hungry, food; thirsty, drink; stranger, welcome; naked, clothing; sick, care; prison, visit. These are repeated 4 TIMES in our passage. One of the things we are reminded during our theological studies is that repetition in the scriptures occurs for a reason.

Here, it is clearly meant to be remembered as a guide to practical discipleship. This is how we should be acting in our daily lives. Jesus is, in a way, filling in the metaphors of the parables we have heard these past few weeks. This is what it looks like to stay awake when the master comes at an unexpected time. This is what it means to bring extra oil for the long nights of waiting. The oil has become food and drink, clothing and hospitality. This is what it means to invest your talents while the master is away. Invest in those who have nothing to eat or drink, those who are naked and sick, those who are strangers or imprisoned – basically, those who probably will not increase your stock portfolio.

Jesus illustrates that those people who extend a heart of love to a hurting world will receive a righteous assessment. In other words, God's judgment is in accordance with our reaction to humanity's need. So how do we “extend a heart of love”?

I want to suggest to you that there are 2 key aspects:

FIRSTLY:

I. Extending Love Means Going Back to the Basics

As some of you may know, I enjoy a good game of tennis. On a typical Thursday Afternoon, I will be playing at the Holy Name tennis courts in a series of doubles matches. The exercise and competition make my heart pump rapidly with excitement. More often than I would like, I find myself trailing the opponent and I need to analyse why. Sometimes, it is because my natural curves around the midriff prevent me from reaching some angled shots of the opponent, but often it is due to not focusing on the basic principles of tennis. I need to tell myself to keep my eye on the ball, and follow through on my shots. I repeat these words to draw myself back into the basic game plan.

Too often the Christian becomes distracted from the basic game plan of God. The game plan of God's priorities as Jesus outlines them includes caring for the needy by giving the basics of food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, and clothing to the poor. In all, the Christian's game plan includes inspiring hope to the hopeless.

And the SECOND key aspect:

II. Extending Love Means It Comes from the Heart

I mentioned earlier about repetition in the biblical texts – well, another thing they teach you at theological college when studying the scriptures is that every detail mentioned has a purpose. The SURPRISE of both the righteous and unrighteous is telling us something.

The unrighteous had not realised that their failure to serve the needy was important, and are shocked that they missed opportunities to show love to the King; had they known God was in their midst, they would have done the right thing. Note that their condemnation (like that of the foolish bridesmaids we heard about 2 weeks ago) is expressed not in terms of them having done some awful crime, but in terms of their failure to do what is right. *'Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'* Sins of omission can be very important.

For the Righteous, their kindness to the needy was not in order to gain a reward and obtain salvation. But rather, this Scripture testifies that salvation is something we discover, often when we least expect it. In this passage, the righteous are surprised to realize they had cared for the King of creation; evidently, they simply shared who they were, and what they had, freely, without calculation or expectation. They helped because the love in their heart compelled them to compassionate action. It was the natural, instinctive, reaction of a loving heart. It was honest generosity.

In many ways, Matthew's depiction of the last judgment in today's Gospel is like a wellness check. Its purpose is not to condemn or scare but to provide a snapshot of our overall health, development that should lead to new habits and ways of life... In Australia, every male who turns 50, receives a medical screening kit in the post. The kit's requirements are to be completed in order to screen for the possibility of bowel cancer. I have yet to complete mine, and I have been constantly harped at by both my doctor and my own Father to have the screening completed.

If the results are clear, fantastic. If something is detected, I go in for more assessment and take necessary steps to remove malignant growths, regain my health, and ensure long-term wellness.

Either way, the checkup could save my life. As our doctors want us to flourish, so too does our Creator, Redeemer, Judge, and King. By demonstrating this natural overflowing of love that Jesus is looking for, this passage provides a wellness check and possibly even a warning to those living in unhealthy, self-centred ways. Loving those for whom Jesus gave his life, particularly those who are undervalued, is a primary expression of our love of God. We may not like warnings or wellness checks; after all, they can ask us to adjust our lives. However, like that bowel screening test, they provide a critical wellness overview that we would be wise to respond to.

So, in conclusion, we know what Jesus expects us to do: feed people who are hungry, quench their thirst, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit those in prison. But is Jesus speaking metaphorically? Let's go back to The Golden Girls and take a leaf out of Blanche's book – 'separating the sheep and goats' is certainly a metaphor; this is not a lesson in animal husbandry! But what about the rest of the passage? Jesus does not give any indication that his pictures of righteousness are metaphors. Giving food to the hungry is not preaching a sermon, and visiting people in prison is not referring to people who are captive to the Internet. Jesus is talking about food that hungry people can eat. Jesus means visiting people who are in prison, even if we think we do not know any. So these instructions are NOT metaphors.

For years, many Christians who read this passage immediately ask: "When will Jesus come again?" But this is the wrong question – because Jesus is already here. We see him in those we may consider least among us. We see Jesus in the child going to bed hungry. We see Jesus in the stranger who is of a different ethnic group. We will see Jesus in the prisoner if we ever go to visit. You see, unlike the sheep and the goats, these sisters and brothers – the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, prisoner – are NOT metaphors. And neither is Jesus.

AMEN.