

Reflection Nov 22nd

I used to work at a McDonald's, straight out of high school, and then a Telstra shop in my early twenties.

Both places I did not much love, though the people were, particularly at Telstra, lovely enough to make me stay for three years or more.

Both places of employment relied on staff to be not merely helpful clerks but salespeople.

At McDonald's this was accomplished usually by offering a small "would you like fries with that" or reminding them about the McFlurry of the moment, but at Telstra it was an altogether more complex affair. We, trained in the art of our process, would make our way through the steps; a polite and genuine greeting, open ended questions narrowing down their needs, and offering them solutions we felt sure would do the job, even if they had not come in with any notion of wanting such. The actual process had a name I've long forgotten, and steps marked out on posters and in material we were to memorise. In fact Maccas probably had something similar that we went through on staff training days.

In order to ensure these processes were followed and all stores were living up to their commitments to make money for each company, as well as giving the customers the joyful interaction they surely desired, each workplace's headquarters sent secret shoppers.

These were people who presented as simple folk in search of a burger, or mobile phone and who went through the processes of purchasing same but who were really planted in the store to make sure we were doing our jobs. They would come later and present to us a detailed tally of how the unlucky person who served them did.

I remember more them coming to the Telstra shop in which I worked. The thing is, though not always the case, we often knew who they were. Either they had the look of a secret shopper, or our manager was tipped off that they were coming in that day, or, laughably, we knew their face as we'd had them in before. So I remember once being sternly warned to do a good job by the look on my manager's face as I dealt with a red headed woman and her inquiry. I think I did a good job, I remembered all the steps, I was friendly and asked all the right questions, I'm sure I got a good mark or whatever it was that we were given as a result. The thing is though, my mark meant nothing in regards to how I functioned as a salesperson. The whole process was undercut by my knowledge of who this woman was and her purpose there. She was not a secret shopper, not really and I was acting in a way that I knew would make my manager proud.

Our text today from Matthew has Jesus acting as a secret shopper of sorts.

In this sort of parable, he lays out the days of final judgement when he will separate all people into two camps; the sheep, or the ones who've done well, and the goats, or those who've not done so good.

He describes to each what it is that has got them into their selected camp; it was their response to various situations Jesus has got himself into. How they looked after him when he was sick, alone, naked, hungry, or in prison.

All straightforward. Until both groups show themselves shocked to have dealt with Jesus at all, which we can understand as we like to think we have a fairly solid account of his time on

earth. When was he in prison exactly? When was he naked and visited by a host of people intent on clothing him?

Both groups wonder when they did that which has been described to them; and fair enough. They have no memory of going to visit Jesus, of feeding him or clothing him. or any memory of neglecting wilfully to do the same.

Soon his meaning is made plain; whatever each individual in each group has done for the least of these, for example those mentioned moments earlier, has done for him.

Little did they know it, but a secret shopper was about and watching all that happened as they interacted with those to whom they were supposed to show love and service. It was Jesus all along! And now he knows who has acted the right way or not and how to judge accordingly.

The thing is, now the jig is up! We have the secret now! No longer can Jesus surprise us with this formula, we know that what we do for the least of these we do for him. we can act in the way best designed to do him proud, to get a good result.

But is this indeed the point? Are we supposed to be on our best behaviour so that Jesus the secret shopper will be pleased with us? and do we even act as though this is what's happening? I would suggest that even having this story to prompt us, the church has still done and continues to do a fairly terrible job of loving 'the least of these'.

I think we're missing something actually if we take this tale as sort of a cautionary cheat sheet: you'd better be good to the poor people or you won't go to heaven, here's where Jesus is hiding.

I think the magic of this passage is not that Jesus is hiding in a disguise of a naked person, or a prisoner, but that Jesus is here identifying with same. Jesus is saying where that person is without, and desperate, and so alone, and so hungry, and so sad, that's where to find me, that's who my focus is on. So when we act out of love and care for one another, because mind you it is who we are and what we are called and made to do, we love and care for Christ's very self, for that is who he has aligned himself with.

I say again because it's worth repeating, particularly on what we call Christ the King Sunday, or Reign of Christ Sunday: Jesus, prince of peace, light of the world, bringer of hope and liberation, Emmanuel God is with us, is here identifying with the least, the unwashed, the forgotten, the poor, the destitute, and pivotally, the guilty.

We can see his countenance in their face, see his eyes when we look in theirs.

So yes we now have this reading to stand as a warning to us, but the incredulity of the people in the reading reminds us that our loving others is not supposed to be a hasty action prompted by the fear that we may indeed be being judged by the secret shopper Jesus.

No, this text reminds us simply, and complicatedly that we are to love. And particularly it seems, to love those who are the most in need of it, the ones who experience it the least.

This is what our measure is made by. This is who we are. how we act in the world, who we neglect, who we ignore, who we hear, to whom we give our hand, our eye, our presence. I can think of no better way to view a life than through the lens of how one has loved and been loved.

this is less about a test and more about what we can learn about where Christ is found in our world. not secreted in the disguise of a beggar in order to catch us unawares, but standing with, living alongside those who are furthest from love, from light, in short, alongside those who need Him the most.

This day is a reminder to us that when we dream about and call for God's presence, the answering cry is not one that comes just from beautiful fields and the songs we sing together when we are gathered. God's presence is an active, real thing and it is tied irrevocably to broken, raw humanity. It is found in need.

We the church must again remind ourselves that it is not our place to hold office or loftily offer opinions or moralise publicly about the sins of those who need our help. It is our place to be where Christ is; to make ourselves small so we can be alongside those who are small. To sit with those left behind, to love those unexpected and help those who are poor, clothe the naked and accompany the alone, visit the imprisoned and feed the hungry. And in doing so, to encounter Christ's very self.

What I want to ask is, what does it mean for us to consider God's presence on Reign of Christ Sunday? What does it mean if God is found in need? For where those who need the most are, those who are the most without, that is where Jesus has said he is.

What kind of ruler has his reign in the presence of the forgotten? What kind of ruler says emulate me by giving yourself away? The kind whose reign is made known in weakness, in humility and fragility and the small silent things of the world. The kind whose kingdom is one made for the rejected, is one where the low will be raised high and the last will be first. A kind whose table is offered to the drunk, the guilty, the sinful, the very broken. This is our King. May we ever seek to serve him as we serve one another, and the whole suffering world.
Amen.