## Christianity Made Complete: Faith Put Into Practice

*Jesus said to his disciples: 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those who are at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'*

Matthew 25.31-end

The Gospel for Christ the King this year comes from the end of Matthew's account of the ministry of Jesus, the culminating message before the Gospel turns to Jesus' passion and death. We could interpret it as an account of the 'Last Judgement', although it is really more of an exposition of the *value system* by which God's judgement operates than it is a prediction of what it will be like for us to find ourselves judged. In this sense it is the continuation and completion of Matthew's account of the *ethical qualities* of genuinely Christian life – the *moral and spiritual*

*criteria* without which no claim on our part to have faith can ever be really persuasive.



The parable of the sheep and the goats is the final component of a *moral handbook* which runs through the whole of Matthew's Gospel, having begun with the *Sermon on the Mount* in chapters 5-7. We might say that Mark's Gospel has a focus on *conversion* itself – how we 'turn to Christ' in the first place; that Luke's Gospel has a focus on God's particular *care for the poor*. But for Matthew it is the complete (and ongoing) conversion of the whole of our heart and mind and soul towards the *values of the kingdom of God* which becomes the true measure of our 'faith'. For Matthew, the moral basis of our attitudes and actions is paramount. Like the Apostle James, he believes that there can be no faith without 'works' – the *deeds* of justice and righteousness – and that the kind of 'faith' which asserts things about *God* but which does not overflow into manifest *goodness* is a faith which is false in its very nature (cf James 1.14-18).

In the Sermon on the Mount the great emphasis is on training the soul towards self-restraint. Matthew commends gentleness, meekness and humility, that we 'turn the other cheek' – that we manage our anger and resentment against each other. He emphasises *kindness* and *mercy*, and prioritises *forgiveness* and *peace* as qualities particularly fitting in those who have been forgiven by God and restored into a relationship of peace with Jesus Christ. In today's parable it is the 'works of mercy' – fruits of a spirit of kindness and generosity of heart – which are our measure. It is how we treat the fragile and the needy, including those lives are untidy, and those whom the Bible describes as the 'strangers in our midst', which will be the measure of our faith or ack of it. In particular, we are invited to recognise the reflection of Jesus Christ himself in each of our neighbours, however unworthy they may be, to treat even the least worthy as if he or she were Christ come among us. It is a seriously demanding measure of moral character; but it is the measure which is blessed.

*The image shows the mosaics in the Church od Sant'Apollinare in Classe near Ravenna.*