

When Did We See You Hungry And Thirsty

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- [0 : 0 0] It certainly is a grand day and very unusual for this part of the world. I gather... I don't know if we should be praying for the greenhouse effect to take hold more strongly.
- Just to... I scarcely know where to begin today because I've got so much I want to tell you and I don't know quite how to do it.
- I was traveling on the ferry over the holiday and I met Lauren Wilkinson, who's a very erudite and certainly very illiterate person.
- And he suggested to me that by way of relaxation, you should read detective stories by Alice Peters. So I don't know if you know them. They're fine Christian detective stories.
- Maybe. I don't know. But... So anyway, I got a couple and I've been reading them over the holidays. And there's something...
- [1 : 1 8] I mean, the format of a detective story is fairly simple. There's, in this case, lovely English countryside, beautiful English villages, old English homes, fine old English customs and traditions.
- There are people that go to church and people who fulfill their responsibility in the community. And people who have a tremendous appreciation of artistic things, of art and music, of good wine, of good food, of walks in the country, of good motor cars.
- And certainly you get the picture of a kind of, at least, middle-upper class society in which everything is going along smoothly.
- And there's something that causes a number of people to congregate, all of whom are very fine and sophisticated people. And you see them dining together or walking together or being festive together and doing those various things that people do.
- Perhaps observing ancient archaeological sites or having discussions about erudite matters of history and politics. And on it goes with really very admirable and very attractive people, the whole collection, until somewhere in their midst somebody is found with his skull caved in.
- [2 : 5 3] And so you begin to see that despite the loveliness of the setting and, in a sense, the people who are there, there is something rotten.
- There is some crime of passion or of greed or of jealousy or of hatred, something which may date back two or three generations, something which was inevitably true.
- So that you have on the surface this picture of very sophisticated life, and then underneath it you have the man whose skull has been crushed and he's been dumped in a ditch and forgotten.
- So in among this wonderful group of people comes the detective, wise and sweetie and very knowledgeable about all the cultural advantages of the society that he's working in, but very shrewd and very discerning, and he slowly goes to work.
- And your mind is teased into thinking, well, it couldn't be that person. Maybe it is. Or it couldn't be that person.

[4 : 05] Am I sure? And then sort of suspicion grows up in your mind, and so this whole society begins to break down and become suspicious one of another, and you are led off on different trails in pursuit of truth and justice, and bringing some criminal to justice, and it's all highly entertaining.

And the only sort of sad parts of the story are when the crime is committed, which is rather beneath us, that such things should happen among us, that this passionate side of human nature should break out and express itself in such terrible violence.

And then the other thing that you have to be very much aware of is that, at the end, one of the really quite nice people, whom in fact you were quite drawn to and quite attracted to, is in fact the villain, who in fact wielded the truncheon or whatever it was that caved in the man's skull.

And so in that way, it's the kind of lovely picture of our world in which everything goes along smoothly, and we see everything happening as it should, and then suddenly we find that there is some dastardly crime, some passion, some crime of passion that somebody was compelled to do out of violent, deeply rooted bitterness or hatred or jealousy.

It's been done. Well, I would like you to look at this passage of Scripture as just such a story. It's a beautiful story.

[5 : 50] It's an attractive story. It's a story that appeals to all our best religious instincts. It's a highly motivational kind of story, and it's a story that gives you a sense of peace and justice and order and that things are the way they ought to be and that that's the way the world has been.

But I suspect that like a good detective story, if you think that's what it's about, you're wrong. And what you need to do is, like a good detective, come across this passage of Scripture and look at it again and see if it in fact says what it's generally believed to say.

See if it in fact undergirds those human traditional and religious instincts which people of every culture and every society could only applaud and say, yes, that's what it's all about.

That's what needs to happen. And they would cheer, you see, because in this lovely story, the sick are visited, the person in prison is visited, the hungry are fed, the thirsty are given to drink, the wanderer is taken in and given a home, the naked is clothed.

What more could there be in all practical consideration to religion? And if it produces those kinds of activities, can anything more be asked of it?

[7 : 26] And could any judge at the end of history call the whole thing to a halt and say that you've missed the point?

You know, you haven't really understood what the story's about. So I want to read the story to you and I want you to pay very close attention to the story and see if you can pick up any of the clues which suggest that what Christ was teaching as he was in this story at the almost at the end of his earthly ministry to his disciples just previous to his own crucifixion.

What was he saying? Why did he take the time? And the difficulty, of course, is that this is a unique story called...

It's a unique story in that it's only in the Gospel of Matthew and it's a unique story in that though it's often called a parable, there isn't very much that's parabolic about it, as most of the commentators will point out, except the reference to the sheep and the goats and that's just a passing reference in the story.

So there we are and I would like you to read it with me and to be looking for some of the clues. So I'm reading from the RSV and I guess that's the RSV that you have in front of you, so we should be on track.

[9 : 10] When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

And he will place the sheep at his right hand but the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, Come, O blessed of 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 drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me.

I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me. Then the righteous will answer him, Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee or thirsty and give thee drink?

When did we see thee a stranger and welcomed thee or naked and clothed thee? When did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee? The king will answer them, Truly I say to you as you did it, to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.

[10 : 41] And he will say to those at his left hand, Depart from me, you cursed into eternal fire, prepared for the devil and all his angels.

For I was hungry and you gave me no food. I was thirsty and you gave me no drink. I was a stranger and you did not welcome me.

Naked and you did not clothe me. Sick and in prison and you would not visit me. Then they also will answer, Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not minister to thee?

Then he will answer them, Truly I say to you as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.

And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. Well, there you have it.

[11 : 48] I want just to help you look at the story from one or two points of view. There's first the question of judgment. And I keep telling people about judgment because it seems to me that it's a very important part of our life.

That there is a moment and the consciousness of that moment in our life when we will stand under final judgment is a very important moment in our life.

The very first time I went out as a student minister, I mean, I was in training for the ministry and I went to work in a parish. And on the very first afternoon of my parish visiting, I went to visit an old farmer called Bill who ran a farm and was in his sickbed and looking out the window and seeing out the window a stranger driving his horses plowing his field.

And he was very sad. But he was also very ill. And I talked to him and I read to him and I prayed with him. And I left him in his bedroom and went out and had a cup of tea with his wife and family.

And before I left the house, they came and said that Bill was dead. So my first pastoral visit wasn't notably successful. But this was a brand new experience for me and I had never come up against it before.

[13 : 26] And so I had to go about the business of arranging a funeral and doing those kinds of things which I'd never done. And everybody said the nicest things about Bill for about two days.

After those two days were over, some of the darker side of Bill's character came out and the way he treated his wife and the fact that he drank too much and the fact that he did this, that, and the other thing which people generally disapproved of.

And by the time the funeral service came around and I'd heard all about Bill from his friends and neighbors just aside so that I would know of him and be able to speak more intelligently about him, I came to a profound conclusion which has stayed with me all my life.

And that is that I would far rather face the judgment of God than the judgment of my neighbors. And that was my first insight into what a good thing judgment is.

That finally somewhere there is a judge whom you can trust. I mean, you think of it, if you think of the Mohawks on the Kanawaki Reserve, you see that there isn't a judge who is acceptable to them.

[14 : 42] If you think of this cross-Canada inquiry into what it means to be a Canadian, it's very hard for people to appoint a judge whom a wide cross-section of society will accept.

What judge will they accept? And so you get a wonderful picture in this story because it is essentially a picture, a story of judgment. You get a wonderful picture of the judge, the one whom God has appointed, that we should stand before him and that the thoughts of our hearts will be revealed and judgment will be passed on us, which is unmistakably the judgment of a God who knows all the secrets of our heart, a God who is just, and that we will ultimately be judged by that just God.

And, as it may turn out, that we will come justly under the condemnation of that God. And having come under that condemnation, we will be dependent upon something outside of ourselves in order to inherit eternal life, as this story suggests.

So there is the inevitability of having to face judgment. The second clue that I want you to look at is the fact that the nations, this is a strange statement that's not easy to reconcile with the teaching of the New Testament.

But it says in verse 32, Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them from one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

[16 : 40] So that this is to be what all of us have spent a lot of our lifetime imagining, that everybody, whoever they are, wherever they are, whatever nation they belong to, whatever ethnic group they belong to, whatever language they speak, whatever tribe or religion they subscribe to, that everybody will come under the same judge.

And the same judge, according to the same principles, will either, will do what happens in this story, blessed or cursed. And he says that that's the end, that that's what happens.

You come to blessing and cursing. And it's fascinating, if you think about it, to realize that this judgment, according by a universal judge, to which everybody comes, from every nation and tribe and language and so on, that God ultimately is the judge.

It's fascinating to see how people imagine even, that that's going to take place. And we spend a lot of time figuring out, well, how is somebody who is brought up without the advantages of Western technology, without the advantages of Western understanding, without the advantages of Western theology, without the advantages of the Western enlightenment and the Western renaissance, and all that Western man has achieved, how can such a man hope to stand before the judgment of God?

Well, so we've worked out some elaborate ways in which we think perhaps anyone can stand before the judgment of God. And you see, that's, that's something that, that, that is, is put there.

[18 : 33] The, the idea that there is some principle of universal judgment, by which all of us will be either blessed or cursed, because that's what it says, that, it says blessing and cursing.

And, right, right in the text, it says blessing and cursing. So, you get, the text is very clear, that you, you end up, in the final analysis, which is a contemporary word for the last, judgment.

We talk about the final analysis. You, you end up in the final analysis, blessed or cursed, inheriting a kingdom, or, uh, being cast into the lake of fire.

Very definite. It's, there's not a lot of middle ground, as you might say. You are a sheep, or you are a goat. And, uh, the, the, the knife comes down fairly clearly and fairly specifically, and you're not allowed to wonder about it.

It's, uh, it's there. Now, that's, uh, that's hard, you know, but that's, that's the way life works. I mean, there is life, or there is light.

[19 : 51] There is life, or there's death. There's light, or there's darkness. There used to be good and bad, but we're a bit confused about that now. But, for the most part, our life has, sort of, a polarized distinctive, that, that, that we are aware of, and I would say, in a sense, universally aware of.

And so, uh, we struggle with that. But to me, the most fascinating part of this whole story, is, uh, that those who, uh, inherited the kingdom, didn't know why.

And those who were cursed, didn't know why. And, uh, and I think there is a kind of New Testament conspiracy, against, conscious religion.

You know, I mean, when I'm feeling very unworthy, and very sinful, and very out of sorts, and my life has really come apart, in bad ways, then, one of the ways I try to put it together, is to have, a fairly good dose of religion.

Go to church quite a lot, which I do anyway, but I mean, uh, I like to introduce some kind of voluntary element into it, by doing a little bit more than I should. Uh, praying more devoutly, spending more time in a religious atmosphere, I like to heighten the conscious awareness of being religious.

[21 : 21] Carry a bigger Bible, perhaps. Or, uh, insult somebody, by testifying to them, in spite of the fact that, you know, they don't want to hear from you. Uh, that, that, how to generate a certain amount of religious consciousness in yourself, by way of, uh, of, uh, upping the, uh, the stakes on your behalf.

You know, and, uh, so, you know, I mean, I, because I'm in the religion business, I know that that sells. But that's, uh, a lot of people like that. A good, warm, jolt of religious feelings does a lot for people.

And, uh, and yet here you have a picture of the final judgment in which people say, well, I didn't know. Uh, I didn't know what you're talking about.

I, when did we see you hungry? When did we see you thirsty? When did we see you sick? When did we see you an alien? When, when did we do this? I don't ever remember doing it.

Uh, particularly consciously. And, uh, Christ said, in that you did it to the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me. And, uh, and then again to those who were cursed, they were given exactly the same prescription and they had the same unconsciousness.

[22 : 40] When did I, I don't, I mean, if I'd had an opportunity, I'm sure I would have taken it, but I don't ever remember having an opportunity. So why is that the basis of judgment for me?

And there is this unconscious element and this unconscious element. You see, if, if you take from the New Testament, one of the, one of the most profound caricatures that ever appears in the New Testament, and that is of the Pharisee who went up to the temple and to pray and stood thus and prayed with himself and said, I thank God that I am not as other men.

And I fast twice in the week and I give tithes of all that I possess. And I'm particularly grateful not to be like him. As he pointed to the, to the, uh, the man, uh, the bartender at the back of the temple, the, uh, that, that is a brilliant illustration of a high level of religious consciousness.

Consciousness. You know, he was conscious of praying, conscious of doing good, conscious of tithing, conscious of being morally superior. All those things reinforced his consciousness so that he assumed that God and him understood him, that he was a very consciously religious person.

And yet this strange story says to us that both the good, that those who are blessed and those who are cursed are unconscious of having done that for which they were blessed or cursed by God.

[24 : 18] And so they, they don't know how to, how to deal with it. So, uh, that unconsciousness is something which I think is, has got to be worked through.

How consciously religious are we? Well, then he goes on, you see, and he gives the, the, the, the circumstances in which this religious consciousness develops.

I was hungry and you fed me thirsty. You gave me to drink a stranger and you took me in naked and you clothed me sick and you visited me in prison and you came to me. Now, I mean, it's, uh, it's a strange, topsy-turvy kind of a thing that, uh, and, and I think that this is what a lot of people have done with religion.

They, they say religion has to do with those things which normally we don't do. You know, that in our, in the normal pursuit of our society, we go after the wealthy, the prominent, the intelligent, the aggressive, the successful, and try and relate to them.

because they're the movers in our world and our society is structured so that if you know them and if you can relate to them, then that's what your life is above.

[25 : 39] And you want to demonstrate to the world in which you live that you have those kinds of contexts and that you live on those kinds of contexts. And for Christ to turn the people you should be identifying with are the sick, the naked, the hungry, all those people, the people in prison is, uh, something else.

well, what we've done then is we've turned this into a massive religious business. So that to the hungry, we provide famine relief and food banks. Uh, to the thirsty, we, we provide, uh, development and well digging.

To the stranger, we provide a benefit, uh, a beneficent immigration policy. To the naked, we provide any kind of delusion to cover up their nakedness.

Remember, it was Adam that got in trouble with his nakedness because, uh, he, uh, he was hiding from God in the garden and, uh, God directed the question to him, who told you you were naked?

You know, he suddenly became self-conscious about it. But nakedness is something that, uh, that, uh, I guess, uh, we, we have to cover up.

[26 : 56] Uh, as far as the sick is concerned, we have huge hospitals and a huge industry, which, which looks after the sick. And, uh, in prison, we have, we, we call them penitentiaries because they're, they're the places where you find a place of penitence and perhaps renewal.

So in a sense, we have institutionalized all this and most religion is related to this kind of activity. Uh, you know, feeding the hungry, water to the thirsty, uh, welcome to the strangers, clothing, the naked, caring for the sick and visiting those in prison.

Now, people, people will pay good money for opportunities to do that kind of thing because somehow it is, it is very satisfactory to us.

And Simon Vale, in, in, in a, in a thing that she wrote, said, wherever the afflicted are loved for them, for themselves alone, it is God who is present.

So I think this is the point at which the mystery thickens. That these people are loved, not because they are thirsty or, uh, not because they are hungry or naked or sick or in prison.

[28 : 17] These people are loved for themselves alone. In other words, God somehow puts into our hearts or it's possible that we can learn to love.

You, I mean, you had the lovely story of, uh, uh, uh, uh, Mother Teresa, you know, going to her first stinking, sick, wounded, uh, putrid human body and taking it in and caring for it, you know, and saying, I could only do that if I thought of him as Jesus.

And she, she discovered, I guess, the secret of this whole story in that somehow she saw in him something, which, uh, which we need to see and something on which the whole mystery here depends.

And, and you see what I, what I think is, is, is problematical for us is, uh, is where does this come from? Where does this concern for the sick?

What, what do we do with it? I mean, from a pragmatic position that we're in is in our society, you know, somebody ought to be paid off to feed the hungry and somebody ought to provide adequate water and somebody ought to look after the naked and somebody ought to do this and something.

[29 : 40] We set up grand institutions to do it. But at the heart of it, there's got to be somebody who sees in the person, sick, thirsty, naked, in prison, uh, a stranger.

There's got to be somebody who sees in that person something more. There has got to be the reality of love. And love is not a particularly conscious reality.

You're not, you may be conscious of praying twice in the day, but love is not something that you can, that you can demonstrate out loud, so to speak. Love is something different.

So that, uh, what, what you, what you get, if I can do it in just a quick illustration, is this person here helping this person here.

And, uh, you see, what, what we've done with this story is this person has become inflated with a sense of their own pious righteousness because they have set up the checklist and made sure that they fed the hungry, gave water to the sick, you know, visited the alien, did all those things.

[31 : 01] And that, that did something for them. It's not unlike the sort of social work phenomena in the United States which tells you that all the poor and destitute people in the United States could have an adequate income to live on if they hadn't set up a social service agency that took all the money.

If they just put it directly to the people who were in need. But instead, they build up this huge society in between of people who care for these people. Now, that's what we have to do, humanly speaking. I'm not suggesting we don't, but, but something is wrong.

And the thing that is wrong is at the heart of this story. And I want to go on and tell you the rest of it next week. If you can figure it out for yourself between now and then, I'll leave you to.

But, I, I don't want to launch into it now because I'm late. And, and I, I do want to pray with you before, before you go. But this is, I think, where the mystery is.

What happens to the person who feeds the hungry and who is the person that is hungry? And how, how do you build that into society? Somebody asked that we pray for the situation in the Middle East, which I want to do too.

[32 : 12] Maybe we could just stand to pray today, could we? Our God, we seem to be very much the victim of forces that we are not really in touch with and don't fully understand and have a terrible sense of powerlessness in any contribution we can make to the direction of our world and the building up of our society and the, the knowledge of God.

We feel so powerless in this situation and particularly powerless in the face of the impending battle that could take place in the Middle East.

And how can we, how can tanks be restrained and how can planes be kept from flying and bombs kept from being dropped? How can we save our world from the terrible ravages of war except to cry out to you that in your mercy and in accordance with your sovereign person purposes of love and life that you will accomplish in the midst of all the complexities of this anarchical situation that which draws men to praise and worship and thank you and to know that you alone are God and you alone are the one in whom we must put our trust.

God, give to people and pay places a pivotal responsibility this day. Give wisdom and love and insight beyond anything that belongs to us humanly that we may see peace in our time and a kind of peace that carries us closer to your kingdom, closer to the blessing you intend for us.

We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.