

A metaphor for today's Gospel is to go to a restaurant and order fish and chips. When the meal comes, the fish is a beautifully cooked and flaky piece of haddock, but the fish is surrounded by a particularly heavy, greasy, and indigestible batter. Matthew is still preoccupied with Judgement Day. We have to cut through his greasy and indigestible batter (the separation of the sheep from the goats) to find the fish, only to find more batter underneath it (sheep inheriting eternal life and goats getting eternal punishment). But the fish in the middle is a perfectly presented piece of theology, in which Jesus asks his followers (us) how they (we) will treat less fortunate people. He singled out the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the unclothed or poorly clothed, the sick, and those imprisoned, asking whether we will treat them with kindness and compassion. To the extent that we do, or do not treat them well, it will be, says Jesus, as if we had treated Jesus himself in the same way. I have to hope that the business of being cast out eternally into the outer darkness is Matthew's editorial about what Jesus said, rather than Jesus' own words.

Jesus' words about helping or not helping the less fortunate mirror precisely two of the promises that we make when we reaffirm our baptismal vows. Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbour as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? Every one of us here today has recited these promises, not once, but many times.

I see the metaphor of a marvellously prepared piece of fish in the food that is waiting to be blessed at the front of the church. It represents a small example of what Jesus calls us to do in today's Gospel. Because of the food that we have collected, some people will go to bed without feeling hungry, some people who be able to work or study without being constantly distracted by the pangs calling from their insides. Please keep up the good work. It is Jesus' work, not ours. It asks us to consider what the Reign of Christ – or alternatively, the Kingdom of Heaven – would look like if it were in place right now, as opposed to obsessing about what might happen at the end of the age.

I have talked about the Reign of Christ and its meaning many times before. Today, I would like to address two other issues. The first is the matter of our special Christmas charitable activity. As mentioned last Sunday in the Announcements, the suggestion is to provide resources to a recent, government-sponsored refugee family. These folks receive government support for one year after arrival, but then all support is withdrawn, unlike for privately sponsored refugees. For a government-sponsored family that has been here exactly one year, this winter is going to be a hard time, especially if the adults have not yet acquired sufficient English language skills to secure good employment. We have contacted Margarita Cardona, the Community Settlement Program Coordinator for Halton Region, who has promised to get back to us asap as to how best our small community can help. I hope that we can be generous, in addition to remembering our friends this month at the Salvation Army Food Bank, where the shelves are often empty after Christmas.

The other issue concerns a video that was presented at last week's Synod which I attended with Peter Mercer. It dealt with the subject of human trafficking, especially related to young girls being trafficked into the sex trade, and affected me very deeply. I had imagined that this was a relatively small-scale issue that mostly involved foreign women being brought to Canada. It is not. Most sex trafficking is domestic. The mean age at which females are lured or coerced into the sex trade is 13½. If this is the mean, half are even younger. The claim was made that the typical Canadian sex slave makes her owners/pimps \$280,000 annually; that is

more than an unbelievable ¼ million \$\$! It is a very big business. The call for young girls is such that an 18 year old commands less than half the price for sex of a 14 year old.

Across Canada, it was reported that the vast majority of girls trafficked are Aboriginal. Many are never seen again; they are the ‘disappeared’ who are the subject of the ongoing federal enquiry. I suspect that girls in Southwestern Ontario are less likely to be Aboriginal, but they are no less at risk. They are young and therefore naive, and very often poor. They are lured by predators with dreams of gifts, an exciting and wealthy new life, and often love, but the reality for the girls is very different. The predators lurk on-line; they recruit in high schools and shopping malls. These girls are our daughters and granddaughters, just as vulnerable as girls leaving an isolated reserve for dreams of a better life in Winnipeg or Saskatoon. As was commented in the video, the greatest risk factor for being trafficked into the sex trade is to be a young girl. This week, Michelle and I watched a documentary on PBS concerning poverty and homelessness in the US. As I watched, I was constantly reminded that the children shown and interviewed would be exactly what the predators would be looking for.

Today, the encounters between the girls and the customers/johns do not take place in organized brothels, so much as in hotel and motel rooms. Apparently, you can find girls brought to hotel and motel rooms anywhere along the 401 in Ontario, not just in flea pit places, but in brand name hotels. An executive of the Bank of Montreal said that he was shocked to realize that when he looked down from his high-rise office in Toronto, he could see hotels within two or three blocks, where these activities were going on, day and night.

Besides the girls, the main actors are the predators, the customers, and the hotel and motel owners and managers who look the other way when their rooms are rented for these activities. In the video, and in our table discussions afterwards, the emphasis was on the protection of the girls. My perspective was that there was too little focus on the ‘customers’, since they drive the provision of the ‘service’. The customers are not the Harvey Weinstens of the world, powerful figures who harass women because they have the power to give or withhold employment. They are ordinary men; neighbours who live on our streets, maybe even members of church congregations.

Sexual exploitation of this kind is not merely criminal; it is plain wrong. In older language, it is a sin. Specifically for the customers it is rape; underage girls simply cannot consent to having sex with older men. I believe that I can and must say this, because as a man myself, I am not going to let the conversation drift in the unhelpful direction of ‘all men are potential predators’. I do not believe that. As I watched the video, I turned to Peter, our lay delegate, and said, “Do you think that there is a role in this for a small rural parish in the middle of nowhere?” He replied, “I was thinking exactly the same thing.” So what can a small rural parish do to be a prophetic voice on this evil in our society? I have been in contact with Sharyn Hall, who presented the video at Synod, to ask whether it is possible to organize some kind of forum at with a panel including law enforcement, community resource people and members of Parliament of the Legislature. I have heard back from Sharyn but cannot give you any details of what might or might not transpire.

Jesus said that what you do or don’t do things to or for the least of his brothers, and in this case mostly sisters, you do to him. On this Reign of Christ, I ask how we might bring the Kingdom of God a little closer by our actions towards these ‘least of our fellow human beings’. This is a much more pressing task than worrying about who is going to be cast out into the outer darkness at the end of the age.