

## Reflection for Together@10

5th November 2023

**Text: Matthew 25:31-46. Title: Homelessness**

### Introduction

*“The good we do lives on in others, and it is one of the most important things that does.”*

These are the words of the late Rabbi Lord Johnathan Sacks who died on 7<sup>th</sup> November 2020. He had been Chief Rabbi in the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth of Nations for 22 years and a source of inspiration for many.

*“The good we do lives on in others, and it is one of the most important things that does.”*

### Let us pray...

*“The good we do lives on in others, and it is one of the most important things that does.”*

Rabbi Lord Sacks was deeply aware of the history of his own people, dispersed throughout the world for centuries. He knew the story of being a Jew because he lived that story in his life and allowed the truth of the Torah to illuminate his dealings with the modern world, and especially those who were different from him.

He once said this: *“The test of faith is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognize God’s image in someone who is not in my image, whose language, faith, and ideals are different from mine? If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing Him to remake me in His.”*

This year at our Together@10 services we have been focusing on Matthew 25:31-46.

*‘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 the King 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.’*

By the way Matthew 25:31-46 is less about doing good to others as it is about finding God in others and, therefore, ultimately in ourselves – making sure that our lives are Christlike in all that we say and do.

Finding Jesus in those who have nothing or who have nobody to care for them – the hungry, the sick, the naked, the prisoner, the stranger is as much about letting go of self and seeing the world through the eyes of Jesus.

As Mother Teresa of Calcutta used to say, it is ‘the gospel on five fingers’ –

“You – did – it – to – me.”

This morning we are focusing on “I was naked, and you clothed me...” (v36a)

What does naked mean in the Bible? Do you know the terms “naked” and “nakedness” combined are used 104 times in Scripture, a high number for fairly uncommon words, indicating their importance. Depending on the context, the terms can figuratively indicate innocence, defencelessness, vulnerability, helplessness, humiliation, shame, guilt, or judgment.

We need to remember two things about clothing in the ancient world. Jews were very modest and public nudity was considered indecent. But not so in the pagan world, where naked statues were everywhere, and male athletic events were conducted in the nude. The word gymnasium means place of nudity – athletes were naked, “gymnos” is Greek for naked, hence our word gymnasium.

The Jewish revolt in 132 BC was sparked by an attempt of Greeks to build a gymnasium in Jerusalem, defiling the holy city with what Jews considered to be indecent behaviour. The Romans were well aware of how scandalized Jews were by public nudity, so when they wanted to execute a Jew in the most humiliating, indecent and degrading way possible, they stripped him completely naked.

Jews had the custom of

- (a) removing their outer garments to express humility and
- (b) ripping their outer garments from the top downward to express profound negative emotions, especially anger, rejection and grief.

So, nakedness can mean nudity, the complete lack of clothing, but more often it means partial or inadequate clothing. Destitute is a synonym for nakedness because it usually is caused by extreme poverty.

To clothe the naked as an act of mercy is firmly grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures. Tobit instructed his son, Tobiah, “Give ... to the naked some of your clothing” (Tb 4:16). The prophet Isaiah, speaking on behalf of God, declared, “The fast that I choose ... clothing the naked when you see them” (Is 58:6,7); and the prophet Ezekiel, also speaking on God’s behalf, stated, “If a man is just — if he does what is right ... [he] clothes the naked” (Ez 18:5,7).

### **“I was naked, and you clothed me...” (v36a)**

*According to Mother Teresa of Calcutta: “God has identified himself with the hungry, the sick, the naked, the homeless; hunger, not only for bread, but for love, for care, to be somebody to someone; nakedness, not of clothing only, but nakedness of that compassion that very few people give to the unknown; homelessness, not only just for a shelter made of stone, but that homelessness that comes from having no one to call your own.”*

As we have heard that, homeless is not just simply not having a roof over the heads. When you hear the word, HOMELESSNESS how does it make you feel? I think there is no way you can’t feel something, when you hear that word.

It's almost worse than the pejorative phrase we sometimes use: *the problem of homelessness*.

And though most of us here have never been homeless – and I want to be sensitive to those that have – it's hard for any of us not to feel something, even if it's just in reaction to the concept of homelessness, and not from firsthand experience.

For example, we might feel, guilty, because, right here in the streets of Melbourne we continually encounter people who are homeless, not usually naked as in Jesus' day, but certainly, hungry, or thirsty or sick.

We might feel, angry. Angry for a variety of reasons: angry that we don't do better as a society to curb or solve homelessness. Angry at the homeless person, thinking they should pull themselves up by the bootstraps and get a job. Or angry at ourselves for feeling guilty for not doing anything.

And we may feel, numb, or depressed, about homelessness – we see it but have become indifferent and jaded.

By the way have you heard of a ***Homeless Jesus*** statue?

A Toronto artist Timothy Schmalz is famous for having created a bronze sculpture of a ***Homeless Jesus***. “[As a Christian,] I’m very sensitive about the stereotypes that people have of Christianity,” said Schmalz of his work, “so I wanted to give a fresh presentation.”

The statue, is of a ***Homeless Jesus***, huddled under a blanket, lying on a park bench, his pierced feet sticking out.

Do you know that when Schmalz's statue was first displayed, there were a few complaints? Some people felt uncomfortable, and instead of recognizing that as a good thing, that it might be an image strong enough to evoke passion and thus have the possibility to change and transform us, they demanded it be taken down. Others thought it was blasphemous against the church.

So apparently, Jesus, just being Jesus, was offensive, and they actually called the police on Jesus! And yet, said Jesus, when you help the homeless, you help members of my family... and me.

After being rejected from both St. Michael's Cathedral in Toronto and St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, his bronze Jesus finally found a resting place at a Jesuit school in Toronto, willing to risk it.

Can you believe that? For me that it's insanity.

Last Sunday we were reminded of the two commandments: *'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'* This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: *'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'*

Let me be honest, the love of God we know in Jesus, is a subversive message for a world that is obsessed with maximizing **profits** for shareholders or believe in the trigger-down economics that doesn't work and pushing the planet towards a tipping point, where the corals die, and the forests burn and life becomes much, much harder for the poor, the downtrodden and the homeless considered as collateral damage for progress and profits.

In God, we now know, there is no death. Death does not have the last word. But the living God, lives through us, like God lived in Jesus, the Son.

For truly I tell you, said Jesus, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family – the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger from another land, the naked, the sick or the imprisoned – you did it to me.

Throughout the world of today human beings are subjected to indignity, homelessness, trafficking and death simply for being alive and getting under the ideological skin of their oppressors. Every day for them is a Good Friday. They wait for the Day of Resurrection in hope and in fear, in trust and in betrayal, in darkness and in light.

Homeless people draw us into their world – and rightly; we dare not abandon them here or abroad. You might disagree with me but the twenty-first century is not yet an improvement on the twentieth century.

The ***Homeless Jesus*** is a reminder of the plights and terrors, millions of homeless people face every day whatever their nationality or creed – and for me the Homeless Jesus is an icon of solidarity with them.

The ***Homeless Jesus*** is a reminder to people of faith and people of none – that as long as there are people who cannot find a suitable roof over their head and families without a place where they can live with dignity, then none of us can roll over in our comfortable beds with an easy conscience. Conscience, public opinion and political commitment must be kept alert every day and never settle back into thinking we have done enough.

*“The good we do lives on in others, and it is one of the most important things that does.”*

*‘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.’*