**WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2023**

**Notes For the Homily/Sermon**

**Matthew 25:31-40 (‘The Sheep and The Goats’)**

Grounded in the text from Isaiah, the homily or sermon is an opportunity to link the issues of Christian unity and racial injustice. The marginalization of people because of their race, culture or language tears apart the fabric of the human community and is also a cause of disunity in our Christian community. Christian unity when it is strong and visible speaks to how the same Spirit received in our baptism creates unity out of the rich diversity of God’s creation and is the plan of God for the unity of humanity.

The parable in Matthew 25 may be read in the specific concern Jesus had for the welfare of his disciples. It has often been read in a more general way - of compassionate care for the least and the last, in light of the biblical imperative for care to whomever is on the bottom of the pecking order.

Mixed flocks of sheep and goats are quite common in the Middle East. Apparently, it can sometimes take an experienced eye to separate the sheep from the goats. In the parable, identity is through their actions. The sheep are the righteous ones because they act – they offer welcome and hospitality to strangers, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and visit those who are imprisoned. The righteous were not aware that their acts of mercy, generosity, and friendship had larger implications. The king tells 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’.*

And so the converse is true also. Those who failed to see, to notice, to act, are told : ‘*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.’*It happens when we keep people and their particular circumstances at a distance, where we cannot see the lived reality of other people.

In his book ‘Exclusion and Embrace’, Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf describes ‘exclusion’ as practices such as assimilation, domination, elimination, ethnic cleansing, and even abandonment and indifference. ‘If others neither have goods we want nor can perform services we need, we make sure that they are at a safe distance and close ourselves off from them so that they can make no inordinate claims on us’. (p.75)

In his ministry, Jesus crossed boundaries to be with humanity. Emmanuel – God with us. He crossed social, geographic and gender boundaries to be with people who were excluded and marginalised.

‘Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison.… Love of God and love of neighbour have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God.’ (Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 15)

We cannot know in what guise Jesus will be present to us. The Gospel imperative asks us to be attentive to allin need - those who are oppressed, vulnerable, disadvantaged, or marginalised. We respond with open hearted compassionate generosity - as if any of these people may be Christ.

A cautionary note lest we hear a call to being busy ‘doing’ acts of charity. Or if we see disadvantaged people only through the lens of ‘helping’. Lilla Watson said, “*If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”* Our common humanity unites us in our struggles and in our achievements. We journey together, and each is changed in the process as we draw near to one another, to learn from and with each other, and to see each other as people in whom God dwells.