

St Mary's Putney

Christ the King

20<sup>th</sup> November 2014

10am

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Are we accountable?

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Ezekiel 34.11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1.15-23; Matthew 25.31-46

1. I sat down to begin writing this sermon on Wednesday afternoon on a train bound for Norwich and then the small local train to Wroxham. I had received a call late Tuesday to visit a sick uncle. As I sat in the carriage looking at the familiar and beautiful countryside (I was born & raised in East Anglia), I realised that complete contrast between serving, as I have done for the last 5 and half years, in North Lambeth Parish as a priest, and serving as a priest in rural Norfolk.
2. The contrast between rural ministry and inner city ministry was brought home to me when I received a phone call from Ailsa. I had just sat down and was enjoying looking at a heron out of the window on the train to Wroxham, when the phone went. I had asked Ailsa to ring as I wanted to check the readings you had scheduled today and whether she thought what I wanted to preach on was appropriate. She said I should preach on what ministry is like in my parish. We spoke too about your growing

Sunday school, which is something I am interested in as our Sunday school is growing, and some of the other wonderful work that this parish engages in both here and abroad.

3. I got rather enthusiastic about what I could speak about – a habit of mine when speaking about North Lambeth Parish. I said that I felt that this passage from Matthew that we have just heard, spoke deeply into the work I see the church doing in my parish. I asked Ailsa if I should speak about how we as a parish are trying to respond to the crime in the area. In my five years I have come across two murders, and just before I arrived one of our servers was indicted and convicted for the murder in a gang related crime. We agreed that the Gospel reading we have just heard was appropriate as it comes during Prisoner's week so I could talk about the work we are trying to do with ex-offenders. In North Lambeth we have two projects trying to help them in the parish: one providing supported work space for those who want to be self-employed; another working to provide accommodation and ways into the established work force.
4. We finished our conversation reflecting that the passage asks us difficult questions and that ultimately it is God asking us to give an account of ourselves both as a church and as individuals.
5. When I put the phone down, I realised that everyone in the small carriage trundling through the Norfolk countryside had stopped speaking and were looking at me. They had clearly had listening into to our conversation. I then realised of course they were

looking twice not just because I had a dog collar on, but because inner city ministry probably contrasts quite starkly to ministry in deepest darkest, and most beautiful, Norfolk.

6. I guess what they did not realise was that in some ways my ministry is not different to the ministry of their parish priests or Ailsa here – yes working in some of the poorer and more deprived parts of London means that you may have more shocking tales to tell of poverty, social inequality, and crime; but ultimately whether we are here in Putney or in North Lambeth, we are all engaged in the same thing, of seeking to prayerfully carry out God's work.
7. I realise that as a priest working in North Lambeth I have been unbelievably fortunate. I have begun my ministry in a place which is diverse and challenging and, importantly for me, I have had the opportunity of seeing the church tackle these challenges in ways that will, I believe, make a difference to the folk who live in the parish in the future.
8. When we read Jesus' words this morning - that we should feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the imprisoned: that we should see Jesus in all these people who live on the margins of society and we must be ready to respond to them – we are challenged to account for our deeds in this life. Do we see Christ in the poor, the lonely, the sick? Do we care for them? How do we care for them?

9. It is easy to criticise the church, we get things wrong, we are often disorganised (in North Lambeth are small number of wonderful volunteers are often stretched to the limit), but I feel that far too rarely are we recognised for getting it right. Fortunately the work of the church is not about recognition, its about something far more important: its about being Christ's presence here on earth. This means it has to be ready to listen, to care, to clothe, to feed, and it has to be ready to receive. The church in my parish is like the last chance saloon, when everyone else has slammed the door because you have a mental health issue, or when no one wants to give you a job because you committed a crime, or when no wants to listen because they are too busy with their lives, then it is the church to which people turn.

**10.** Today the church – all of us gathered here today – you and me - are called to give an account of ourselves, we are called to ask ourselves whether we have heeded Jesus words when he says: “Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to the one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” For if we don't treat each other like Christ, whether in Norfolk, North Lambeth, or Putney, we I fear will be called to account.

**Amen**