Readings: Ezekiel 34.11-16, 20-24; Ephesians 1.15-end; Matthew 25.31-end

Would you like to meet Jesus? It sounds an easy question. The answer should be obvious, you’d think, when the question’s asked to a bunch of people gathered in a church on a Sunday morning. Whaddya think we’re here for? That’s the simple answer.

But is it that simple? Let me ask the question again. Would you like to meet Jesus? I’m going to make a guess that when you hear that question a whole lot of digestive tracts in your lower abdomen start to tighten. Because meeting Jesus means facing the truth. Of course we say we love Jesus, walk with Jesus, follow Jesus, believe in Jesus... but actually to meet Jesus: that’s another matter. We couldn’t hide. We couldn’t pretend. We couldn’t sustain the lies we tell ourselves and others. It would be like being naked in public – except much worse: if you’re naked, everyone can see your skin and whatever shape your age, heritage, diet, exercise, and plastic surgeon have turned you into; but Jesus can see beyond your skin into your soul.

Even if you’re not hiding a great host of secrets – which, as a pastor, I suggest would put you among a small minority – then meeting Jesus would be altogether too intimate to deal with. When you ask someone a direct question, the chances are they’ll reply ‘What kind of a question is that for a...?’ and then they’ll insert the time you’re in... ‘Monday morning/Thursday afternoon/Saturday night.’ Any time of the week fits in because the universal understanding is it’s never a good time to ask a direct question. We think we want intimacy but Jesus seems to offer us rather more intimacy than we can handle. He sees the truth that we fight so hard to hide and he assumes a level of communication we find it unimaginable to sustain.

Would you like to meet Jesus? Suddenly we’re back-peddling into all the carefully-constructed defensive labyrinths that constitute our lives. Here’s one. It’s called ‘No one understands the pressure I’m under.’ Have you any idea what it costs to live in London? I have to work so hard and I have so little left over once I’ve covered my household needs and I’m supporting three other people and a fourth who’s so useless I’m more or less supporting them too and then there’s these other people that depend on me and take me for granted but truly they need me and yes of course I spend a lot of my time in certain ways but you have to understand if you want to get on in the world I’m in that’s what you have to do and... sorry I missed that as I was just texting to say I’d be late for my next appointment and what? You have the cheek to ask me if I would like to meet Jesus? Have you any idea of the pressure I’m under?

Here’s another. It’s called ‘We need to do this properly.’ We start our budget conversations 18 months ahead of time and we have to bear in mind the cost of living and pension arrangements not to mention health and safety and yes we’re about alleviating suffering and that’s what motivates everyone here but we have a partnership agreement that plays the long game and we’ll start to see returns on our new technology in about a year’s time and until then we can’t commit any more funds and if you want an appointment you’d best submit a form as an attachment and what? Would I like to see Jesus? Has he made an appointment? We need to do this properly.

Here’s another. It’s called ‘He wouldn’t want to see me.’ I never seem to be able to talk to people because someone more interesting comes along and they always drift off to talk to them. I don’t...
know if it’s because I’m shy but I’m always worried I’m going to be letting someone down. I don’t feel I’m much to look at and I’ve never got great results at school or anything. I find it’s best not to hope for too much otherwise you just get disappointed. You ask, would I like to see Jesus? I think you’ll find he wouldn’t want to see me.

Whatever our defence system – whether it’s a heat-haze of stress or a bureaucratic maze of procedure or a barrier of low expectations – we’re all pretty adept at protecting ourselves from the truth and intimacy of meeting Jesus. We’re here this morning because nominally, from habit, hope, or happenstance, we want to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But when someone says, ‘Would you like to meet Jesus?’ the panic-button goes off and the red lights flash on and all our defences kick in. Turns out we’ve organised our whole life to ensure we don’t have to.

And along come these words of Matthew chapter 25 and in unambiguous terms they say, ‘You know, meeting Jesus? It’s easy.’ Now this is a shock. We assumed either we had to be an incredibly devout mystic or an astonishingly erudite theologian or an extraordinarily ecstatic charismatic. But the news is, it’s easy. Here’s what you do. You come face to face with, and be silent with, and touch, and speak with one or more of those known as ‘the least of these.’ You make a habit of it, do it regularly, so it becomes second nature – so you hardly notice you’re doing it; so if you weren’t doing it you’d think something important was missing from your life even if you couldn’t immediately tell what.

Who are the least of these? People who are hungry and thirsty. Those who have no clothing or shelter, who are humiliated by exposure or at risk because they are a stranger. Any who are ill, or shut away and isolated in prison. Not just people you already know. Not just people of your own faith, or country, or class. Just people. And how do you do it? Well, it needs to be a real meeting. Giving money to an organisation is great and important, but it’s not the same as meeting. Meeting means face to face: silence, touch, and finally words.

Meeting doesn’t mean fixing problems. When someone’s hungry it’s not fundamentally about the food. The food overcomes the barrier between you by giving you a pretext for beginning a conversation, a connection, initially little more than a transaction. It’s not fundamentally about the drink. Digging wells in sub-Saharan Africa is fine and good but what matters most is the meeting, the ending of a person’s isolation, the sense of touch. When someone’s naked or a stranger it’s not fundamentally about finding accommodation, or vouchers for Primark. Of course these matter but what matters more is not averting your gaze, recognising a person’s humanity, realising it could be you, expecting to discover something wonderful and surprising and true from a destitute or migrant wayfarer. When a person’s sick it’s not fundamentally about the cure, it’s about saying I don’t have better things to do with my time than dwell with you, in pain, in misery, in not knowing, in tiredness, in fear. When a person’s in prison it’s not about organising a jailbreak or reducing their sentence, it’s about saying I’m going to share your shame and claustrophobia and depression and despair and distress and I’m going to see you as the person you were and will be again. The point is not to get hung up on the precise condition of the hungry, thirsty, naked, stranger, sick and prisoner, but to put yourself face to face with the least of these. The point is not to assume these are all casual encounters with beggars on the street, but actively to seek out and commit to regular ways of meeting those in places of need and desperation.

Would you like to meet Jesus? It’s easy. But... we’d actually prefer if it were difficult. We’d prefer to work for 15 years on an irrigation scheme for to improve crop yield or 20 years to refine a vaccine against an infectious disease. We’d rather lobby for a change in the migration laws or blog about the need for prison reform. We’d choose to work up policy proposals to distribute water purification tablets or create a voucher scheme for low-cost clothing. These are all noble and worthy ways to invest our time but from the point of view of Matthew 25 they’re all sophisticated ways of avoiding having to meet Jesus. We get that Jesus is made known in the least of these but we
want the encounter to be on our terms – where we’ve given the money or done the research or implemented the engineering or passed the legislation and where we’re confident we’ve made a difference. What we can’t bear is being with people when we can’t bring any significant help and we can’t make a difference and we might be asked for something we can’t give. Those are the people we are called to meet if we would like to meet Jesus.

Matthew 25 is often called a parable but it isn’t a parable it’s a prophecy. Jesus is actually saying this is what’s going to happen. This is the Last Judgement. Jesus himself will come in majesty. Every single one of the angels will be around his throne. Every single person who has ever lived will be gathered before him. And what is the question Jesus will ask every single person who’s ever lived? ‘Would you like to meet me? – not just say hello, but truly be met by me, been seen and known and cherished and loved by me – be my companion?’ And those on his right will say ‘Errr, I guess so, it’s hard to say no, I’m not sure what this means.’ And Jesus will say, ‘Yes, you do know, because you’ve already met me, you’ve made meeting me a regular part of your life so you wouldn’t be without it.’ And those on his left will say, ‘Well, it certainly seems the best option, sure, I’d be glad to meet you.’ And Jesus will reply, ‘Then why didn’t you take the chance to meet me all those times I was so eager to meet you?’

It’s a good question. It’s the question this prophecy puts to each one of us. The reality is, we’re scared stiff of meeting Jesus. We know he’s forgiving and gentle and understanding and kind. But we fear our naked souls will be too much for him and his intimate love will be too much for us. And we’ve got so used to our tactics of distraction and our practice of prevarication that we can’t face the moment of truth. This prophecy says, ‘Put it this way. You’re going to meet Jesus anyhow, with all the angels in heaven and all the peoples on earth. How d’you think that’s going to go? Take my suggestion. Jesus has told you where to find him. Why not meet him now?’