

## Sheep and Goats

The sheep and the goats: Good people go to heaven; bad people go to hell. If you do good things, engage in social programmes, satisfy the needs of justice – you will go to heaven. If however, through indifference, or ignorance or laziness, you don't get round to those things, you can get used to eternal damnation. That it seems, is how this passage is usually read. It's quite difficult not to read it that way! But it doesn't mean we shouldn't try –

Either we can do the conservative thing of claiming that any other way of looking at it is compromise; or the liberal thing of dismissing the story altogether because we don't like it. But whether we love it or hate it, it is worth remembering the true function of this kind of text. It's worth remembering that this is a parable – it is an explosive, subversive, disorienting story, and worth remembering that these parables are told by Jesus in order not to confirm our suspicions, but to pull the rug from under our feet. But to grasp the nettle, it means – as usual – realising that we have to grasp it, otherwise, we'll end up finding that it stings us.

It is usually introduced with some heading about the last judgement – and is seen as the allocation to heaven or hell. But after almost two thousand years of mis-interpretation, you'll be pleased to know that here, on this very evening ... you're not going to hear the correct meaning. Mainly because there isn't one! This story is not told to convey some secret or hidden truth – it is an invitation to encounter God, and this parable I believe does it more explicitly than any other parable in the whole of Matthew's Gospel.

This is a story that appears only in the Gospel of Matthew, and it introduces the events that lead directly up to the crucifixion and resurrection stories. It is a glimpse into all that follows – it looks forward to the events of the King on the cross. The Roman execution stake here, is the throne of this King. Not the kind of King that people expected. This is a King that brings not peace but division. It is a King who divides those who stand before him! And the king does not sit on his throne because he'd been on his feet all day – this is a king who has just risen to power, and enters his glory. The glory of the arriving King – the word that we have for coming really means 'coming to power'. I suppose you could say that when you're translating from the Greek, with that word you never know if you're coming or going!

So essentially, what Jesus is doing – immediately prior to his fateful entry into Jerusalem – is giving a prophecy. He says that this entire sequence about to unfold before them, will be the Son of man coming to power, ascending the throne, going to the cross. That is how this King's power is to be seen: *“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory”*

Well, this is not the way that the King would usually come to power! So it is hardly surprising that opinion will be divided! When people are stood before him, they will fall into two camps – and people's acceptance of this King will be depend upon the way that they relate to others. Visiting people in prison, feeding people who are hungry, welcoming strangers. All these activities will shape the way that people encounter the King, it will determine their ability to recognise the King! To understand what kind of a Kingdom this is:

And so this is a King that identifies himself fully with the most needy inhabitants of his kingdom. Not the usual picture of power in royal courts. What you did for the least of these, you did for me. Whatever you did not do for the least of these, you did not do for me! Our

ability to recognise the King, is entirely dependent upon the way that we relate to the neediest people we can encounter. Those are the privileged members of this kingdom, whose glorious throne is the ultimate symbol of humiliation and suffering.

What follows appears to be a pronouncement of judgement – as though the subjects of this kingdom are dragged away kicking and screaming into hell, or welcomed with arms into heaven. But what if it the destinations of this heaven and hell have already been chosen by both sheep and goats – their destinations have already been chosen – and what the King does is simply name their destination – that he simply names the direction in which their lives are inexorably drawing them.

If you can recognise a King nailed to a cross, then you have grasped what the Kingdom of God really is, you are already entering into it. If the cross is something that repulses you – if the suffering and humiliation is something you avoid at all costs, if you have not done anything for the least of these, then your life has already taken you from all that the Kingdom is – regardless of whether you think you want to go to heaven or hell. You cannot shun those things, nor reject ‘the least of these’, and then be glad to enter the kingdom where this King reigns. You’d be horribly disappointed!

If you are that kind of person, you have entered into the rubbish tip, the eternal fire prepared for the devil and all his angels. That is the kind of life you are left with – it’s a million miles from Jesus, and so you depart from him. You go away sad, like the rich young ruler. You depart into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and all his angels – the life of all who have rejected God’s kingly rule.

The reason that this is so shocking, is that once again, it is uttered to people who all thought they knew what the Kingdom of God was. So when it is said that all nations are gathered before him, it is as shocking as things get. Matthew is widely recognised as the most Jewish of the four Gospels. The family tree of Jesus is traced only back to Abraham, the teaching is structured on the teaching of Moses, the fulfilment of Jewish prophecy is paramount.

So what we have here is the last teaching of the Gospels that Jesus gives – and it reveals most shockingly, that in the end, it is all nations who see this king on the cross – and some will acknowledge his kingship and some will not. In the end, Jewishness has nothing to do with it. And after all the events of the Gospel, again – this most Jewish of Gospels compels the disciples to make disciples of all nations! The Kingdom of God extends beyond imagination.

And today, I suppose the vast majority of us belong to those nations. We are the ones who are invited again to stand before this cross. To see a king, nailed to a cross – to acknowledge the kingdom of a crucified God. And our ability to recognise this King is rooted inevitably in the way that we relate to others.

This brings us a long way from trying to do the right things to please this God so that he will let us into heaven. Instead, we are left – by God’s grace – able to recognise this God because of the way that we have encountered him through other people. We may have no idea that this is what was happening. But we have an example this week.

Baptist Times Piece:

I'm not sure when the last time we were plastered over the front page of the Baptist Times. But as many of you now know, in recent weeks we have been working with some of the homeless people we know. The corporation of London have a target of clearing the streets of homeless people by the year 2012, but many of us believe that this very worth goal does not justify the current means by which homeless people are being treated. Since they cannot be moved legally, they are being bullied, manipulated, intimidated off the streets. And the more you learn, the more you realise how disturbing this is.

But the interesting point for us is this. Not of course, we don't simply want to give ourselves a jolly good pat on the back and cry three cheers for Bloomsbury. There is a lot of work to do – and we have to recognise the gifts and efforts and commitment of those with whom we profoundly disagree. Nevertheless, it is worth nothing this. Picture a judge, whose justice is meted out not from some glorious throne room, but from the humiliating cross of a condemned criminal. That true vulnerability speaks something of who God is, and is the point from which judgement is passed. It seems ridiculous – and yet in John's Gospel – it is when Jesus is lifted up onto this cross that he draws all people to him.

Well, many of us put ourselves in a position of vulnerability. Read the reports on the website, and you'll read of police who were asking us what on earth we were doing out on the streets at this time of night when it was so dangerous. And in an era when the church has virtually no power and not much of a voice – see what happens when the church makes itself vulnerable. We have not only homeless people and charities, but city authorities, senior police officers, chief executives – calling us, emailing us, writing to us – all very keen to offer their defence, to justify their position, to defend their case: and I found myself wanting to say to people from all these agencies, precisely what Jesus had once said: 'who appointed me as judge and arbiter over you?'

How on earth, can simply putting ourselves in a position of vulnerability – and humiliation – where we were woken up on the streets of our city in the early hours of the morning – how on earth can this put us in the position of judge? And yet, this seems to be precisely the point made by the parable of the sheep and the goats – that Jesus on his cross, hangs in silence, holding up a mirror to those who gather before him. He hangs their, a sum or all the shame, and defeat, and vulnerability and brokenness felt by his whole race. – and it is precisely in that capacity that his judgement is passed. He need not say a word – and this is the climax of Matthew's Gospel. The church finds its true power, in vulnerability, brokenness, listening. It is not that power is sought – it is perhaps that the power of this Gospel is stumbled across just here:

During the truth and reconciliation commission's hearings in South Africa, the court heard this story. A police officer went into a house, and shot the father, then shot his wife, and turned his gun on the five year old boy who watched silently. And the court heard how, with the gun pointing at this vulnerable child, with all the horror he had witnessed, the policeman broke down. The court heard him apologise to this boy, offer to pay for his education, made several attempts at offers of reparation, and then simply fell at the feet of this boy – weeping like a baby and seeking forgiveness, from this vulnerable, broken, little boy.

And right there is the parable of the sheep and the Goats – right there, that policeman is stood before the king on his throne in all his heavenly glory – and in the hug that this little boy gives him, comes the sentence, 'come, you who are blessed by my father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.'