

## MATTHEW 25.31-46: THE PARABLE OF THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS

[Chelmsford 12 December 2010]

### 1. JUDGEMENT IS FOR REAL

The Parable of the Last Judgment terrifies many – it certainly terrifies me.

It's the kind of parable which we would like to have erased from the Bible: **“When the Son of Man comes as King and all the angels with him, he will sit on his royal throne, and the people of all the nations will be gathered before him. Then he will divide them into two groups just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats”** (vv31,32)

It's an awesome picture – enough to give anybody the shivers.

As a result, some have sought to dismiss the picture.

Indeed, they have pretended that these concepts of Judgement and of Hell are the products of the dark middle-ages, dreamt up by bad-tempered monks in dank cells.

BUT this picture of judgement cannot be so easily dismissed.

It is present in Scripture. What's more, it is present in the teaching of Jesus.

Just this week I read that 25% of all the sayings of Jesus relate to judgement.

More than any other person in the Bible, Jesus talked about judgement and about hell.

As a result a distinguished Scottish New Testament professor once wrote: *“No doubt our forefathers... sometimes painted the Judgement in colours no longer credible to those who have seen the love of God to sinners revealed in Christ. Yet no creed can be called truly Christian which does not affirm that we are finally accountable to our Maker”* (AM Hunter). Or in the words of another Scottish professor: *“A theology without a hell is not worth a damn”*.

Indeed, a theology without a hell, without the concept of judgment, is not only un-Christian, it is also profoundly dissatisfying.

For it leaves us with a world where there is no basis for morality.

Think about it, for a moment.

Justice is one of the most profound of longings of the human race.

***If there is no justice, then deep within ourselves we know that something is wrong.***

For the fact is that justice doesn't simply mean 'punishing wickedness', it means bringing the world back into balance.

Central to the Jewish and Christian faith is the belief that this passionate longing for justice comes from the creator God himself. Jews and Christians believe that ***God will eventually do justice on a world-wide scale.*** In a way that the International Court of Justice in the Hague can only dream of, one day the world will be put to rights. One day justice will be done – and will be seen to be done. It is this which underlies the parable of the sheep and of the goats.

But look again – who is it who ensures that justice is done? It is Jesus – the Son of Man!

**“When the Son of Man comes as King... HE will sit on his royal throne”** (v31).

What an amazing claim – Jesus here claims that our eternal destiny is in some way dependent upon him! Who is this man?

In response to such a question CS Lewis once wrote: “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse”.

For us Jesus, the Son of Man, was – and indeed is – the Son of God.

It is precisely because of who he is, that his words demand our utmost attention!

## 2. JUDGMENT INVOLVES SEPARATION

**“The people of all the nations will be gathered before him. Then he will divide them into two groups, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats”** (v32).

In the Middle East, to this day, sheep and goats regularly graze together during the day. During the day there is little to distinguish one group from another – the goats can be similar in colour to the sheep – in fact the main difference is that the sheep’s tail hangs down, and the goat’s tail sticks up. But at night-time they need to be separated, so that the goats, being less hardy, can be kept warm.

So, says Jesus, as surely as a shepherd separates his animals, so surely will the Son of Man separate the good from the bad: **“He will put the righteous people on his right and the others on his left”** (v33).

- Placing the sheep on the right is a sign of their being put in a place of honour. To the righteous the King says, **“Come, you that are blessed by my Father! Come and possess the kingdom which has been prepared for you ever since the creation of the world”** (v34).
- By contrast, the goats are placed on the left, i.e. they are put in a place of dishonour. To them the King says: **“Away from me, you that are under God’s curse! Away to the eternal fire which has been prepared for the Devil and his angels!”** (v42).

A fearsome, terrifying picture, indeed.

Dr Samuel Johnson once wrote: *“I remember that my Maker has said that he will place the sheep on his right hand, and the goats on his left. That is a solemn truth which this frivolous age needs to hear, for it strikes at the very roots of life and destiny”*.

His ‘frivolous age’ was the 18<sup>th</sup> century – but his words are as apposite now as then.

One day there will be a separation.

## 3. JUDGMENT IS ON THE BASIS OF DEEDS

What is the basis of this terrifying separation?

What distinguishes the righteous from the unrighteous?

***The basis of the judgement to come relates to the way we respond in the present to the needs of the weak, the vulnerable, and the poor.***

Listen to the words of the King to the ‘unrighteous’: **“I was hungry, but you did not feed me, thirsty but you would not give me a drink; I was a stranger but you would not welcome me in your homes, naked but you would not clothe me; I was sick and in prison but you would not take care of me”** (vv42,43).

Those who are condemned are not those who have committed murder, who have engaged in rape, who have cheated their employers or exploited their work-force.

No, those who are condemned, are those who have done *nothing*.

It is precisely this sin of ‘omission’ as distinct from a sin of ‘commission’ of which they are guilty. Jesus condemns not positive wrong-doing, but utter failure to do good.

By contrast, the righteous are welcomed into the Kingdom, precisely because they have done something – in particular, they have done something to the unfortunate of this world.

- They fed the hungry/They gave a drink to the thirsty
- They welcomed the stranger/They clothed the naked
- They cared for the sick/They visited those in prison

Judgement takes place on the basis of the care we have shown to others.

At first sight this seems to contradict much of the preaching which takes place in this church. For the thrust of my preaching is that the basis of the judgment is the way in which we respond to the love of God in Jesus.

**“What must I do to be saved”**, asked the Philippian jailer. **“Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved”** was Paul’s reply. Paul preached a gospel of grace. As he wrote to the Ephesians: **“For it is by God’s grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God’s gift, so that no one can boast of it”** (Eph 2.8,9).

The fact is that our best efforts can never form the basis for getting right with God – for even our very best can never be good enough for God.

As Jesus himself said: **“When you have done all you have been told to do, say, ‘We are ordinary servants; we have only done our duty’”** (Luke 17.10)

But the fact that we have been saved by grace, should not stop us from seeking to serve God. Indeed, Paul, when writing to the Ephesians, having spoken of the grace of God, then goes on: **“God has created us for a life of good deeds”!**

Justification through faith, though it is a gift of God’s sheer grace, lays upon us the responsibility to work out in practice our new status as children of God.

The only kind of faith in which God is interested is faith which shows its reality by the deeds it produces. **“What matters is faith that works through love”** (Gal 5.6).

At the final judgment our deeds will be the evidence of the kind of people we are. It is not a question of our earning salvation – rather our deeds are the evidence that our faith is real.

Or to return to the teaching of the parable: *“A person cannot be a follower of Jesus and be void of compassion”* (Snodgrass).

The fact is that religiosity is not enough. Actions, not words, are called for. We are called to show our love for Jesus by the way in which we treat others.

What does this say to us this Christmas time?

What does this say to us about the kind of people we entertain in our home?

What does this say about the way we treat people less privileged than ourselves?

#### 4. JUDGEMENT INVOLVES JESUS!

At the time those performing these simple acts of kindness failed to realise their significance. As far as they were concerned, they were simply helping somebody in need.

But Jesus makes it clear that these simple acts of kindness were in fact done for him.

In this respect the judgment involves him – not only as judge, but also as recipient of our love and care.

Jesus doesn't just care for the hungry and the thirsty, the stranger and the naked – in some strange way he identifies with them. For to the question: “**Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?**”, the King replies: “**I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these members of my family, you did it for me**” (v40: see v45).

Or in the words of Eugene Peterson's paraphrase: “*Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me – you did it to me*” (The Message).

The story is told of how *Francis of Assisi*, then a wealthy young noble-man, was riding out one day and met a man disfigured by leprosy. Francis was moved to dismount and hug the poor man. As he did so, the face of the leprosy sufferer changed into the face of Christ.

A similar story is told of *Martin of Tours*, a Roman soldier who was a Christian. One freezing day a beggar asked him for money. Martin had none, but, seeing the man blue with cold, he ripped his soldier's cloak in half and gave one part to the beggar. That night he had a dream. He saw Jesus in the courts of heaven, wearing half his cloak. He heard an angel ask, ‘Master, why are you wearing that battered old cloak? Who gave it to you?’ And Jesus replied, ‘My servant Martin gave it to me’.

To move to more recent times, it was this parable which proved to be of major inspiration to *Mother Teresa of Calcutta*. She said that her work was done for, with, and to Jesus: “*We serve him in the neighbour, see him in the poor, nurse him in the sick; we comfort him in his afflicted brothers and sisters*”.

“**Whenever you did this for one of the least important of these members of my family, you did it for me**” (v40). Reflect for a moment on what this means.

It means that we can never patronizingly dispense charity.

We can never feel ourselves superior to the weak and poor of the world – for they come clothed with the majesty of Christ himself.

To the non-Christian the poor and the under-privileged may seem to be in the position of beggars – but the eye of faith sees in them the Lord Jesus Christ, who comes to claim that which is His by right. Yes, the poor and the weak have an absolute right to our service.

What's more, if the presence of Jesus is to be found in the poor and the weak of this world, then this surely means that we can never be grudging or stinting in our service and aid to the underprivileged – but rather our service will be marked by great joy and great liberality.

For the debt we owe to Christ is so great, that we will never want to resist an opportunity to show our love to him.

## 5. JUDGMENT INVOLVES SURPRISE

Jesus through this story implies that there will be many surprises on that day of judgment. Lots of people who were very confident of their standing will be undone. Lots of people who rated themselves very lowly will be astonished by their reception.

For in the parable, the righteous were unaware of the worth of their deeds. They did not see Christ's face in the hungry or the thirsty, or in the naked & the lonely. They did not visit prisons anticipating a Jesus 'incognito'. All they saw when they spotted a hungry person was a hungry person.

Nor did the so-called unrighteous appreciate the seriousness of their position.

There were surprises all round – as there will be surprises on Judgement Day itself.

- Well-known Christian preachers may find themselves on the very edge of the crowd in the kingdom of God. Many whose names are known to but a few will be perhaps nearest to the throne.
- Indeed, there may be those who thought of themselves as Christians who find themselves outside the kingdom – while there may be those who never made it to church membership who will be inside the kingdom.

Again, let me say I find this an uncomfortable parable.

Indeed, am I alone in finding it a terrifying parable? For I know that I do not always love as I should, I do not always care as I should.

Surely our first response to this word of Jesus is to say: "*O Lord Jesus, last Judge, but first, our Saviour; help us to care. Help us to care*".