

This “Parable of the sheep and the goats” underpins the medieval promotion of the “corporal acts of mercy”, as depicted in surviving wall paintings in churches such as Wickhampton and Moulton St. Mary: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick. Despite the antiquity of the paintings, they carry a timeless message for any Christian. But that is probably not the original meaning of the parable, nor the only meaning that we might draw from it today: here are three thoughts in the light of current events and circumstances.

The scene of the parable from the outset is a judgement of the nations, by the Son of Man: the figure, originating in a vision of Daniel, who has been given that authority by God. In the Jewish scriptures, *the nations* are the Gentile powers with which Israel came into contact through history: sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile. But on the day of the Lord, all were to be judged for their treatment of God’s chosen people. That’s a reminder, should we need it, that no human power is absolute, or eternal: such power belongs only to God. Actually, we are in less need of such a reminder today, for we increasingly find ways to hold those in power accountable. There’s the press and social media; in a democracy, the blunt, but effective instrument of the ballot box. Successive UK Governments have established Regulators, like HSE, FSA, Ofgen, Ofwat and the rest; they have even sought to regulate themselves, as the Home Secretary is currently experiencing. The Church, which in history accumulated all sorts of privileges, is finding itself increasingly open to scrutiny: it’s difficult to be critical of such processes when they find, as with the current one into child abuse, that the institution has fallen short in the exercise of its authority. The drive for accountability is not itself beyond criticism: it can multiply bureaucracy and undermine trust; but it does drive home that power brings responsibility.

In the global judgement in the parable, it’s notable that the judge is concerned about fundamental human necessities: food, clothing, somewhere to live. On a personal level this might be seen as a matter of basic human kindness or charity; but on a global scale, in a world of inequalities, it becomes an issue of justice. Having developed the concept of human rights, the UN is now promoting 17 *Sustainable Development Goals*. They deserve to be better known; they incorporate the human needs of our parable (e.g. 2: Zero hunger; 3: Good health) with environmental wellbeing (e.g. Life below water (14) and on land (15); 12: Responsible consumption and production). One imagines the Son of Man is judging the nations of today on how well they subscribe to such concerns, rather than how much they protect the interests of their own citizens. We should be concerned, therefore, that our Government intends to increase the defence budget (which might in itself be justifiable) while cutting that for international aid.

Returning to the parable’s original faith context, we need to appreciate that non-believers (the Gentile *nations*) are being judged on the basis of how they have treated the bearers of the Gospel (the *members of [Jesus’] family*) – which is in line with teaching elsewhere in the gospels (*He who receives you receives me*). Even though Christ is King in glory, the parable implies that the Gospel is still being preached by followers who lack basic necessities; dependent on hospitality; liable to imprisonment for their actions – in line with Jesus’ sending of the Twelve without money or spare clothing. I’ve referred to the Church losing its privileges and moving away from the centre in our increasingly secular society: we should find that is a more authentic, less compromised place from which to proclaim the message of Jesus. And since most of us don’t preach from a position of poverty, maybe we should make ourselves more aware of the message of those who do: whether churches on the margin in our own society; or the global Church, through mission organisations like USPG. And, in the spirit of Jesus’ parable, ask what they might need to receive from us.

Thanks be to God.

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