

The Parable of the Sheep and Goats

Matthew 25:31-end

Introduction

I think it's fair to say that most of us realise that we now live in a society that has largely lost interest in religion, particularly organised religion. And the climate in which we preach the Gospel is a difficult one, as people simply do not take the Gospel message seriously anymore. Many just ignore it, whilst others respond with hostility or even anger - because the Gospel message is one that confronts people, in particular it challenges them to make a decision about God, and about how they live their life. But it also raises all kinds of questions and issues for them, as well. Indeed there are many issues and concepts within the Christian Gospel that just don't sit comfortably with the western world view - and one of those issues is the Judgement.

The idea that after death there will be some kind of final judgement, is both welcomed by our society, and yet at the same time firmly rejected by it. It's what we might call 'a dichotomy', and you see this contradiction at work all the time.

Take for example, the situation where some notorious figure is being led into court by the police, guilty of some heinous crime. TV News reports will often show an angry crowd gathered outside the court house, shouting all kinds of abuse, suggesting that the accused might want to "rot in hell." The idea that there's some kind of judgement awaiting such people after death clearly finds a place in the public consciousness - it seems to give them some sort of satisfaction. Whether they really believe it or not, is of course, a moot point.

However, the idea that 'normal' people will face some kind of judgement after death and be required to give account of their life... well this notion doesn't really find a place in our modern world view at all - at least not anymore.

Many people resolve this dichotomy by convincing themselves that, if there is a judgement after death, then it's only going to be for the likes of criminals, murderers and so on, it's not going to affect them. If there is some kind of judgement after death, then they're going to be okay - they'll be fine, they tell themselves.

But, in our Gospel reading today, we hear Jesus Himself teaching us about this very thing - the Day of Judgement. It comes in the form of the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Although this particular

parable only occurs in Matthew's Gospel, it's a fairly well known parable and not too difficult to understand; though it will be helpful to put it into context.

The End Times

The parable about the final judgement, is part of a block of teaching about the End Times, when Jesus begins to explain what kind of things will happen, as the time for His return draws near. We call Jesus' return, "the Second Coming" – an event that will bring this present age, and the earth itself, to an end. Jesus teaches His disciples the importance of watching, waiting and being ready for His return. In the final part of the teaching, we have this parable of the Sheep and the Goats, which describes the Day of Judgement that will follow Jesus' return.

Whilst I understand that in our modern world, it's easy to be deeply sceptical – even dismissive - about such issues as heaven and hell, life-after-death and judgement, I know, but all these things formed an important and essential part of Jesus' teaching and they're central to the Gospel message.

We cannot rightly be called Christians if we are not able to fully embrace this crucial teaching about the Jesus return and the End Times - especially life-after-death and the final judgement. These are not negotiable aspects of our faith, which is why they are firmly embedded in the historical Church Creeds.

Christ the King

So then, let's have a look at the Parable itself. It opens with a scene which takes place following the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. So this all happens at some indeterminate point in the future, following the end of this present age. We have Christ the King, seated on His throne and the peoples of the earth are assembled before Him. And the seat on which Christ sits is a judgement seat.

Christ the King, then takes on the role of Jesus the Good Shepherd and the peoples are divided into two camps. The righteous and the wicked are likened unto sheep and goats, respectively. Jesus Himself will separate one from the other. The sheep to His right; the goats to His left. The sheep will be declared righteous and thereby gain eternal life; the goats however, will not – they will be condemned. So this parable, this teaching doesn't pull any punches. So what are we to make of it?

Well the first thing to make clear is that this parable is not saying: "as long as you do a few good deeds, a few righteous acts during the course of your life, and don't do anything too terrible, then you'll be OK, you'll be counted among the sheep." It's not saying that – not at all, and such teaching would be completely out of step with the rest of the NT anyway. So we have to be careful when

interpreting this parable, and when trying to understand it, we must do so taking into account the rest of Jesus' teaching.

The Sheep

So, let's proceed. The sheep are deemed to have been righteous because they cared for Jesus' physical needs when he was hungry and thirsty; when He was a stranger, naked, sick and a prisoner. However, they exhibit surprise: "When did we do this for you?" they ask. Jesus replies with the now famous words:

'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' (25:40)

This is a key verse in the parable. The sheep, the righteous ones, engaged in acts of kindness and mercy, not to gain access to the kingdom, but because they belonged to the kingdom; because they were true followers of Jesus and were living out their faith, being obedient to God's Word.

By showing compassion and mercy to others, they were - unbeknown to them - serving Jesus Himself. By acting in this way they demonstrated that their faith in Christ, was real. That their love and obedience for God was more than just lip service. And so the fruit of their obedience manifested itself in a life of good deeds and righteous action. It was faith that saved the sheep, faith that manifested itself in good and righteous action.

One of the great truths in this parable, is that the best way to serve Christ, is to serve those around us - especially those who are considered to be, 'the least'. St Paul summed this up perfectly in Gal 6 when he said:

"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."

Our service to Christ, starts within the household of faith, but extends outward to embrace others.

A Living Faith

Now this is faith in action - a living, saving faith. Why do I say that? Because, as St Paul also said:

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no-one can boast." (Eph 2:8)

True faith – a faith that will save us from condemnation, must be transformational. By this I mean our faith in Christ must transform the way we think and the way we behave. It must inform our priorities.

If our faith isn't affecting the way we live, think and act; if our faith isn't affecting our attitudes and priorities, or the way we treat others; then our faith isn't a living, saving faith. Because if our faith is to save us from condemnation on the Day of Judgement, then it must be *transformational*.

In singling out the sheep, Jesus is singling out those whose faith translated into changed lives - lives that produced good fruit and good deeds.

The sheep then, are a biblical metaphor for the people of God, and are therefore invited to receive their reward and enter the Kingdom. We're not told in the parable anything much about what the Kingdom will be like. However, we do know that it will be everlasting and those who inherit the Kingdom will be immortal, as Christ Himself is immortal. We also know that God is generous beyond our imagination and Jesus tells us our reward in heaven will be great. (see Matthew 5:12).

The Goats

The goats on the other hand, their lives were not transformed - either because they had no faith at all, or because the faith they had was a dead faith, not real; just a façade. As St. James writes:

“In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” (James 2:17)

In other words, a faith that does not change us as people, will not save us from judgement. These are the goats. They did not care for the sick, the hungry, the prisoner. It seems they had little time for anyone but themselves. Too blind to see or care about the needs of those around them - other than when it suited them. We can all be kind and generous if we think there might be something in it for us.

Jesus has nothing but harsh words for these people, for they neither obeyed God nor loved their neighbour. Their sin was not some heinous crime, such as murder; rather they lived their lives for themselves. As such there is no inheritance, no eternal life for these, whom Jesus labels 'goats'. For them there is only condemnation. The King says:

“Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire.”

Harsh

Whether we choose to take this statement of Jesus literally or metaphorically, it still seems harsh to our modern ears. However, our task is not to judge God, but to obey Him. But what we do know is that God is always fair and just in everything He does, and we can trust His judgement.

Furthermore, we have been forewarned. We know the judgement is coming so we have time to prepare. As Jesus said: (Mark 1:15)

*“The kingdom of God is near.
Repent and believe the good news!”*

Through a genuine and living faith in Christ, we can be counted amongst the saved (i.e. the sheep) and so avoid the condemnation of God. And this is our great hope, in Christ we are safe (if the faith we have is a living, active faith) and we will inherit the Kingdom of God, and dwell with Him forever.

Epilogue

Finally, by way of an epilogue, I understand that what I've just said will certainly raise questions about the people we know, who do show acts of kindness and love towards others, but don't believe in God, and do not claim to have any faith in Jesus.

Now this is a good question and deserves an serious and considered answer, and indeed there is biblical response to this very important question - but there isn't time to deal with it this morning, so we will have to come back to this at another time. Amen.