

Join the Identity Parade [Matthew 25: 31-46](#)

What makes you stand out from the crowd? Your gender? Your height – or, in my case, lack thereof? Your build? The way you walk? Your style of clothing? Complexion? Particular scars or moles? Hair or eye colour? The shape of your nose? Your mouth and teeth? Shoe size? What about your ears?



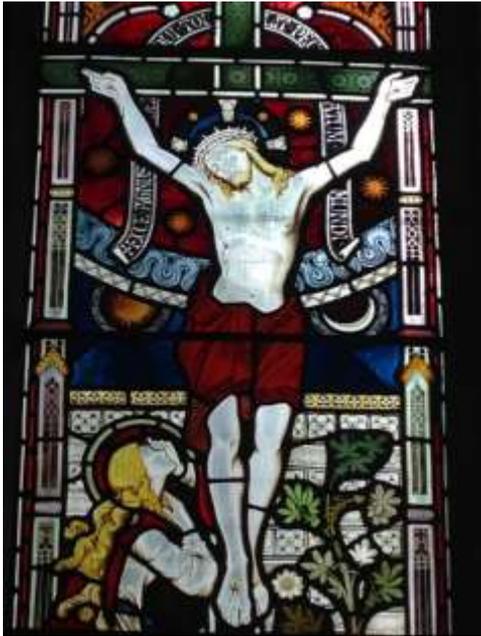
However, sometimes it is easy to blend in with the crowd, and for all those distinctive features to melt together. In the case of a herd of Middle-eastern livestock, telling your sheep from your goats can be quite tricky. Herders may care for a mixture of sheep and goats. In arid conditions, all the animals will need to forage wherever they can if they are to thrive, so the distinction between sheep liking to graze on grassy tops whilst goats preferring to stretch up and browse on vines and branches can get blurred. Whilst goats' tails may flip upwards and sheep's tails droop down may seem like another tell-tale (!) this may not be clear if the tails are trimmed. You could take blood samples and discover that all the sheep have 54 chromosomes and goats have 60, but this would be very disruptive.

Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats is a reminder that identity matters. Even though it may be difficult to distinguish between the two creatures, it is possible. In fact, the sheep show their deep, utterly distinct sheep-ness not so much by what they look like, but by their attitude.

Goats are readily able to adapt to their environment. They are independent creatures and can survive without a shepherd to care for them. Sheep, however, become anxious and can die if separated from their flock; they need a shepherd to care for them. They listen and respond to their shepherd.

In Jesus' parable, he describes a time when his mixed crowd of livestock are separated into sheep and goats. There are no disguises here. The 'true sheep'





of his pasture identify with their shepherd by adopting his loving attitude to others, going out to those in need; to the outcast and injured. The people he gathers to his right do not even realise that they are serving him in what they are doing: “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?”

By contrast, those he calls ‘goats’ have not made any connection with their shepherd. They have not identified with him. They have not appreciated that the image of God is present in everyone and have gone off in their own ways instead.

How did they miss the point? Well we might ask. Yet, how often do we miss the point? Do we truly identify with our Good Shepherd? Do we see the image of God in all humanity, or do we keep some people “off-limits” from our compassion? As we hear the barrage of news reports and make our responses in prayer and action, what difference does our faith make? Is Christ our King?

The words of the Collect for the last Sunday before Advent from the Book of Common Prayer are a reminder that we need to ask God to change our desires and to make an active choice to follow him:

Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people, that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Revd Vicky Barrett

