

Sermon based on Matthew 25: 31-46

Theme: 'BEING PREPARED'

22nd November 2020, Hazel Davis

I grew up on a riding stables, we had 13 ponies, 4 dogs, 8 cats and a goat. A goat called 'Suzie'. She got into a lot of trouble, she would jump over her stable door and eat the washing on the line or the flowers in the neighbour's garden. She constantly got out and would run off into the neighbouring field which often had crops in it that she would eat, or if it had sheep in it, she would chase them! I haven't heard of a goat that chases sheep, but Suzie did, and I have many memories of my Dad, the farmer and his dog trying to catch her as she caused the sheep to scatter in panic from one side of the field to the other. We could say that they were trying to separate the goat from the sheep!

In our Gospel reading today we see a very different picture of goats and sheep being separated. Jesus shares with his disciples a glimpse of the future, a vision of the ultimate outworking of the kingship and authority of God. A time when the Son of Man will come in glory to gather and judge all the people from all the nations. The Shepherd who untangles the mixture of sheep and goats into an ordered setting – the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. (Matt 25: 31-32)

The vision is a reminder of the Old Testament prophecy in Daniel (Ch 7), a vision of the ancient of days, white as snow, sitting on the throne of fire and wheels. Thousands and thousands of people from every nation stood before him as the books were opened. The theme is also cosmically expanded in the vision of the apostle John in the book of Revelation (Ch 20). This theme of end time judgement and justice is what Jesus is referring to in Matthew.

Let's take a look at the context of this vision in Matthew's Gospel, the first thing we notice is that it follows two parables: the 'Ten Bridesmaids' (or the 'Wise and Foolish Virgins') and the 'Parable of the Talents'. Both parables have the theme of the importance of being prepared for the return of Jesus, the Son of Man, depicted as the Bridegroom who returns for the wedding celebration and/or visualised as the Master who returns to see what has come of his investment of talents. In both parables the bridesmaids and the talent holders are found to be either prepared and ready for the return of the Bridegroom or Master and therefore they have a joyful encounter or, as it was for the others,

they had not prepared themselves for the return of the Bridegroom or the Master and so they did not have a positive encounter.

What is useful to bear in mind about these parables is that it will be very clear to Jesus on his return (and to everyone else) that those who have believed his word, acted and waited in faith for his return will be prepared because, as apostle James states “...*faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*” (James 2: 17) In other words, it’s an empty faith. All ten bridesmaids have lamps, but only half of them purchased enough oil to have light that lasted until the Bridegroom returned, whereas the other half of the bridesmaids had empty lamps.

The Master gave a certain amount of talents to his three servants according to their ability, but only two of them increased their talents. They are justly rewarded by the Master with more talents, whereas the one who did nothing with his talent, even what he has is taken away. Empty lamps and unused talents are worthless in the kingdom of God. These parables set the scene for the importance of being faithful and therefore prepared.

The vision of the Shepherd separating the goats from the sheep is the climatic end of these parables and it points to what Jesus is preparing himself and his disciples for. We know this because immediately after talking to the disciples about vision he states: “*that the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified*” (opening verse of Ch 26). What Jesus is highlighting here is the bigger picture, to remind the disciples of what the prophets have said about the time to come, when the Son of Man will come into his kingdom with kingship authority and justice.

Justice is rooted in God’s character and justice is what God demands of his followers. The central concept of this vision is that the ultimate judgment will be in the hands of God, but he also expects his people to act with love and justice towards one another. How they treat each other and the poor and oppressed among them will be measured. This still holds true for us today. We live in a world full of injustice and pain and we, the people of God, look forward with hope for Jesus’ return in glory, because we know and trust that God’s justice and mercy will renew all things and that all tears will be wiped away.

Jesus the Shepherd knows his sheep, he knows their hearts and how they act. And the sheep know his voice and are obedient by God’s grace to do what he

asks of them. We are his sheep if we have faith in Jesus and trust and obey his word. And what does God ask of us? Is it not in the words of prophet Micah (6: 8) '*...to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*' The clear evidence of how we do this is in the way we treat each other and those who are least among us: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger (or foreigner), the naked and the prisoner. How we love each other, the poor and the oppressed, reveals whether we, the people of God, are behaving as righteous sheep or rebellious goats. Let us not behave as though we are goats, like Suzie the goat, living selfishly, stealing food that was not given to her, trespassing and hurting sheep. Instead, let us look forward to that day when the Son of Man will come in all his glory bringing justice and reward. Let us today recommit to love each other and especially those in need and, in doing so, we will be serving and loving the Lord. And if we continue in Jesus' love for us by loving others, we will by grace be prepared for his return with nothing to fear.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father,
we pray in your mercy
that you would forgive us for our goat like behaviour and attitudes that cause distress to others,
that in the knowledge of your forgiveness
help us to remember the bigger picture,
the joy set before us to humble ourselves to serve you
by feeding the hungry,
giving drink to the thirsty,
clothing the naked,
welcoming the stranger,
visiting the sick and those who are in prison.
That your love would be shown
and your truth would be known
as we look forward in hope to the day when truth and justice will reign.
Amen.