

Christ the King 2023 Matthew 25:31-46. The sheep and the goats.

I had planned to preach on Ephesians today, but I feel compelled to talk about today's gospel which perfectly summarises the Kingdom Parables we have been looking at over the last couple of weeks, (plus I have preached on the Ephesians passage twice in the last 18 months!).

The Kingdom parables describe how we are to wait for Jesus' return, and today's passage on the sheep and the goats, (which is not actually a parable) is why the way we wait is so important, because today, the long-awaited master, bridegroom, and King suddenly returns.

Today in the gospel passage, Jesus is telling us what our lives will look like at the *end* of them, if we have truly loved God with everything we are and have, and have loved our neighbour as ourselves. In doing so, he describes two different sorts of people – sheep people and goat people.

Sheep people care for the master's property when he's away; are filled with oil and shine brightly, and use all they have been given by God. Sheep people are the ones whose heart's desire is to love God with all they are and have and love their neighbour as themselves.

And people for whom this is not their heart's desire, Jesus calls goats. It's as simple and as complicated as that. The way we treat others is a sign of the way we treat Jesus. We will constantly fall short, but God only looks at our hearts. Scripture says, "God's eyes range throughout the world to strengthen those hearts that are true" (2 Chron 16:9).

How we treat others will reveal our eternal destiny. Now good works to others does not bring salvation, we are justified by faith alone. But our behaviour demonstrates our paternity. To paraphrase James, if our faith does not result in works of love, then our faith is dead. We are children of God and Jesus wants us to choose wisely in our day-to-day life as believers.

We are all such fragile creatures, and all sorts of things can happen. If you listen and read some of the stories of people who find themselves homeless – they became homeless for all sorts of reasons, and often very quickly. Now, not only is this person Jesus, but they are also you and me.

Another observation we can make I think, is that the way we treat others reveals the state of our relationship to Jesus. When I see another person in need, do I treat them as if they were Jesus? When Jesus refers to 'these brothers of mine,' he is not referring to his biological family or Jewish family, but everyone.

Elsewhere in the gospels Jesus insists "'Who are my mother and my brothers?' Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.'" (Mark 3:33-35)

Even here, Jesus is not limiting our loving to other believers. We only need to look at what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount about loving our enemies. Or his reply to the lawyer who asked him, "who is my neighbour?" in the sublime parable of the Good Samaritan.

Jesus expects us to show compassion toward whoever we encounter in need. That person becomes our neighbour. How we treat them, may, by God's grace, lead them into his family also. The apostle John put it like this in his first letter. "We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19).

The way we treat other reveals the condition of our heart. When we are in a right relationship with God in Christ Jesus, filled with his Spirit, serving his cause, we will be unaware that our goodness, our kindness, our faithfulness, or gentleness toward others is anything other than natural.

The way we treat others is actually the way we treat Jesus himself. Jesus said, "Whatever you did for the least of these you did for me" (25:40).

We are forced to ask ourselves these really hard questions. "Do I consciously treat people the same way I would treat Jesus?" If not, why don't I? Earlier in Matthew (10:40) Jesus goes further and says, "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me." (Matthew 10:40).

How we treat others will reveal our eternal destiny. Because how we treat others reveals the state of our relationship to Jesus. Because how we treat others reveals our heart condition. Because how we treat others is how we treat Jesus.

These observations are inescapable, I think. Jesus wants to ensure that we know the way to live our lives – the right heart attitude. In a beautiful passage in John, Jesus says "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:14, 27-28).

That is his promise. God never intended us to live alone. Sheep cannot survive alone. Goats can but sheep can't. Sheep need the constant attention and protection of the shepherd.

They need the company of the flock to grow to maturity as God intends. That is why God created the church, the flock of Jesus Christ.

We can't do this in a sort of 'splendid isolation.' We need to see Christ in others, and be Christ to all. That is why Jesus' Church exists - to be our flock. That is why we take we need

to take it very seriously. We need each other's gifts and talents, each other's service, each other's fellowship, and each other's prayers.

Charles Wesley wrote 9,000 poems, of which 6,500 were used as hymns, but he once said that he would gladly have exchanged them all for the privilege of writing just one hymn that sums up the very gospel passage we read and talked about today.

But I think this life we are called to live was best expressed over three hundred years ago by a 31-year-old man called Isaac Watts, and my favourite worship song:

"When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the prince of glory died,

My richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride.

Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small,

Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

Let me pray ...