

Sermon: Christ the King 2020 The Sheep and the goats

St Matthew 25: 31–46

The last judgement! There, I've said it. I really didn't want to mention it at all. It reminds me of the men with sandwich boards proclaiming "The End is nigh!" that used to frighten me when I was growing up in Grimsby! I would have avoided it if I could but it's there staring us in the face this morning. We tend to think of this "judgement-speak" as being at best Old Testament stuff, at worst, mediaeval superstition, but Jesus himself confronts us with it, not just once but a good many times in different ways. We are told that one-day, time, as we know it, will end and we will be accountable for the choices we have made.

Here in today's Gospel we have a dramatic word picture to help us as we try to understand what that might mean. What we have to try and do is look at how it works, what it meant to Matthew's first readers and most importantly how we might apply it to ourselves.

Let's start with those first readers.

Each of the Gospel compilers writes from a different standpoint depending on his target audience. Matthew is writing about 50 years after Jesus' death to a Jewish church. Jerusalem has fallen to the Romans and the persecutions have begun, just as Jesus predicted some forty years before at the end of his life on earth. Matthew takes great care to make constant links with the Old Testament, pointing out how convincingly Jesus fulfils the many prophecies about the longed for Messiah. This is what Jewish Christians would relate to.

Matthew's first readers are suffering persecution, not only from the Romans but from their fellow Jews. We can read about this in the history books, not just the Bible. They've been thrown out of the synagogue and life is very hard for them.

Matthew takes pains to reassure them that although life is so tough, Jesus has already explained how and why this must be. He doesn't demand more of them than he faced himself, and above all they are very precious in God's eyes.

Let's look a bit more closely at the images chosen here by Jesus. First, the picture of himself as the shepherd king. This links him firmly with King David, the shepherd boy who became the greatest king the Israelites ever had. Jesus' first hearers, and Matthew's Readers, would have got that one straightaway even if we don't.

They would have understood about sheep and goats as well. Unlike our sheep and goats, Mediterranean ones look very similar. While on holiday on a Greek island my late husband, John and I were told, with a wink, that tonight in Michalis's taverna there would be roast lamb- -spelled G-O-A-T!

Only the shepherd knows how to separate them.

The first hearers wouldn't have needed any of that explained. The new shepherd king, the longed for messiah, God's anointed, is for them the one who will finally free them from their enemies and rule the world. This messiah, translated into Greek as the Christ, this new king will be the direct descendant of their revered ancestor, King David.

Throughout the New Testament it's made clear that Jesus claims to be this new king, the messiah sent from God, and the actual human face of god himself! That's what gets him crucified. But the kind of freedom he offers, the kind of power he uses and the kind of justice he promises are absolutely not what they expect at all. Everything in the kingdom of God is topsy turvy! The mighty are humbled and the humble lifted up, the strong are weak and thee weak are strong. The sinners are forgiven and the self righteous accused.

This picture of the last judgement is in exactly the same vein. People are to be judged on whether they have been compassionate or merely indifferent, not on what they have achieved or done wrong. Anyone can be compassionate, feed the hungry, visit the sick and the prisoners, clothe the naked and welcome the stranger. You don't have to be clever or rich or powerful to do that. And the list isn't exhaustive. You could add visit the

lonely, be forbearing with the irritating, be patient with the slow. No doubt you could think of more. None of that is beyond the most ordinary of people, even in lockdown. We just have to be a bit more imaginative in how we can manage it. Kingdom values are within the reach of every human being, if they so choose. And that's the key, making a choice.

Jesus offers a clear choice-, for him or against him.

Many people are simply not aware of that choice; others find it very difficult to make; still others deliberately turn away. It's not our business to judge the motives of other people. That is for God alone, but for sure there will be plenty of surprises!

Surprise is one big element in this sheep and goats scenario.

Both lots are astonished when Jesus tells them how they have, or haven't, ministered to him! Lord, when did we see you hungry, thirsty, sick etc etc, they're all amazed. Both lots!

It is amazing! When we care for other people it seems we are actually caring for the Christ in each one! And if that's true, and Jesus says it is, then even more awesome, when we allow someone to minister to us, we're allowing them to minister to the Christ in us!

This is all about each precious human person being made in the image of God.

Of course this divine image is blurred in all of us. It can be so broken or so smashed up that it becomes almost unrecognisable. But that doesn't alter the fact that God's intention is for us to reflect his likeness, compassionate, and also just. The two do go together although at first they might seem to be at opposite ends of the spectrum. Both compassionate and just.

We human beings have a deep seated longing for justice don't we, for things to be fair. That comes out in children in a big way. "It's not fair"! they cry!

We've all been there. But it's much bigger than that. It's about making things right, protecting the weak, eradicating evil.

Abuse of the vulnerable arouses a passion in us all, a desire for justice for those who can't protect themselves. It can, it often does, get twisted and become blind rage thirsting for revenge, erupting into conflict. But in its essence it's something much purer than that. Like love, mercy, grace, true justice is a characteristic of God, and something deep in the human psyche longs for all of these things. Many human wars have at their roots perceived injustice, but fighting will never solve our problems. The way of Christ is different. Even though we ourselves can see no end to the troubles of this world, God can.

In the meantime, we are each responsible for how we choose to treat other people during our time on earth. Not just the ones we find easy. When we mess up, and we will, often, God is always ready and waiting to forgive and renew us. Jesus says to each one of us, care for others in need and let them care for you. That way you will come to know me in the very depths of your being, whatever your circumstances. That way you will find life in all its fullness as citizens in my kingdom in this world and the next.

The last verse of our offertory hymn puts it in a nutshell:

So let us learn how to serve and in our lives enthrone him,
Each other's needs to prefer, for it is Christ we're serving.
This is our God, the servant king, he calls us now to follow him,
To bring our lives as a daily offering of worship to the servant king.

Amen.

Carole Lewis