

Sermon for the Last Sunday of the Church Year

The Text: Matthew 25:31-46

The 'Parable of the sheep and the goats' is the last of three parables which end Jesus' public teaching in Matthew 25. Like the previous two parables, it tells us about the end of time when Jesus will return to the earth to complete his work of redeeming creation. Like the previous two parables, it sends a clear message that there are those who will enter into eternal life with God, and those who will not. However, there are still a couple of surprises in the parable that we can miss if we're not paying close enough attention to what Jesus is saying to us.

It can be easy for people to misunderstand the message of this parable. Jesus' statement that 'when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me' (v40) has been interpreted as saying that Jesus expects us to do lots of good things in our lives. This can easily become a message which says that we should be doing good and helping people because we might miss out on spending eternity with Jesus if we don't. Misinterpreting this parable can lead us to think that if we are not doing enough good for other people, or if we are not doing the right kind of good, then we will be sent away into eternal punishment and find ourselves excluded from the eternal life Jesus offers us.

The good news of Jesus is that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works, as Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:8-9. Instead of hearing this parable telling us we should do more good things—which is all about works—how can we read it from the point of view of faith and grace?

This parable is ultimately about people—people who are hungry, thirsty, alone, naked, ill or imprisoned. One way we can hear Jesus' words is that they describe people who have literal, physical needs. Providing for people's physical needs is important for us to give a faithful witness to the love of God we encounter in Jesus. However, another way we can hear Jesus' words is that they are describing people who have spiritual or emotional needs. In a relatively affluent culture such as our own, this can be where Jesus' words hit much closer to home.

For example, there might be people we know who are hungry for hope or thirsty for acceptance or a sense of self-worth. Loneliness is one of the biggest problems in our society because people can often feel isolated from others, like they are strangers, and need a community where they

can belong. There are times when the Bible connects nakedness with shame, such as Adam and Eve after sin entered the world in Genesis 3:7-10. People we know might have lots of clothes to wear but can still experience shame because of wrongs that they have done or have been done to them. There might be people we know who are suffering from mental illness, or imprisoned in addiction, fear or guilt.

It can be easier for us to identify the people Jesus describes in this parable as those whose physical needs are obvious, but can we can't overlook people who are spiritually or emotionally hungry, thirsty, lonely, naked, ill or imprisoned with whom we go through life every day. It's relatively easy to donate money to a charity, but it can be a whole lot harder to invest our time, our energy, our love, or, as we heard last week, the grace and goodness of God which Christ gives to us, into the lives of the people who are close to us and whose needs run deep in their hearts and souls.

That's where we find the real surprise in this parable. This parable talks about Jesus coming back 'in his glory, and all the angels with him, (and) he will sit upon his glorious throne' (v31) as the King to judge the entire world. We could hear this as Jesus has left us and will come back one day. Then he drops the biggest surprise: he was actually here the whole time! The King is still present with us, but not as a glorious and powerful monarch. Instead, he is with us in those around us who are hungry or thirsty for acceptance or hope, in the stranger that crosses our path, in people who are naked, vulnerable or experiencing shame, in the mentally ill and those imprisoned in addiction, fear or guilt. The King walks among us, hidden among those who are in need physically, emotionally, and spiritually. To use the words of the King himself, he is among us in 'the least of these' (vv40,45).

This shifts the focus of the parable from the good works we are supposed to be doing to asking: 'Where are we looking for the presence of God?' Some in our wider Christian family like to focus on looking for God in his heavenly glory and to want to be raised up to meet our King there in our worship. If we listen carefully to Jesus' parable, however, it points us to the presence of our King during the time between his ascension and return in the least of those around us. The King is present with us in the people that often don't notice because we can be too busy looking for God up in his heavenly glory. Jesus is telling us to look around us, to see the people beside us who are in need of any kind, and to recognize the presence of God in them. When we find Jesus in those in need, in the least of these, that's when we also find the God who reveals himself to us as a vulnerable baby in a manger, and a beaten, bleeding, naked man

nailed to a cross. This is how God reveals himself to us, and who is still with us in 'the least of these.'

It is good for us to want to help those who are physically hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, ill or imprisoned. We can do that by participating in community service projects or donating money to charity organizations. It doesn't really matter if they are Christian organizations or not, if they acknowledge God or not, because God still works through them to do good in the world. However, we can't forget that 'the least of these' also includes the people right next to us who are emotionally or spiritually hungry, thirsty, alone, exposed, ill or trapped. Who might that be in your life this week?

When we read this story from the perspective of faith, we can see that when Jesus returns, he won't be asking how much money we donated to charities. He'll be looking for how we treated him in 'the least of these' people around us.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.