

Christ the King 2017    The sheep and the goats    Rev RG Hilliard

In this morning's Gospel we hear the last teaching which Matthew records from Jesus so we should expect it to be important. It is about the judgement of all people and he uses the famous analogy about the sheep and the goats. Perhaps we should begin by recognising the plight of the poor old goats as the sheep get all the praise and it seems as though Jesus is always getting at goats. Goats are not worse animals than sheep and, in my experience, they appear to be equally stupid.

The shepherds separated the sheep from the goats because sheep tolerate cold better than goats, so shepherds put goats in a protected spot while the sheep continued to forage in the wild. The readers of the gospel of Matthew, which we have been following this lectionary year, would be familiar with the image.

Using this language was also helpful at the time because the word sheep was often used as a metaphor for the people of God and the Messiah was often spoken of as a shepherd. This language has been taken very literally throughout Christian history. The image is portrayed of Jesus sitting on a cloud at some point at the end of human history. The whole of humanity is lined up with Jesus sorting out two groups, one side going through the pearly gates to eternal bliss, the other miserable offenders are sent off to eternal damnation, which is absolutely ridiculous.

Leaving such nonsense aside what is the point that Jesus is making? Matthew appears to be concluding the teaching of Jesus in his gospel, by recording these words which show that Jesus was serious about expecting lives to be changed by his teaching. The lives we lead here on earth are of consequence and so our behaviour has serious implications for our time in eternity. The way in which we treat others has importance to God as he takes note and there is judgement.

As the alternative Collect for today reminds us;

*God the Father, help us to hear the call of Christ the King and to follow in his service, whose kingdom has no end; for he reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, one glory. Amen.*

Jesus is using a picture that was familiar to his hearers to illustrate the fact that good and bad behaviour is different and is judged. Jews grew up familiar with the image of the Messiah as somebody who would come and judge humanity and separate them as a shepherd separated the

sheep from the goats. They expected that the sheep would be the Jews of Israel, and the goats would be everybody else but Jesus tells his hearers that they are in for a surprise. There is going to be judgement, but the criteria for good and bad has changed!

From now on the basis for being in God's good books was to be based on the teachings of Jesus and obedience to them. If people wanted to be a part of the Kingdom of God then there was a certain way of ensuring success; treat your neighbour in the way that you would wish to be treated yourself. Jesus mentions six deeds of mercy. They are not meant to be comprehensive but show that Jesus is concerned by specific material acts of kindness towards the needy. It is the authentic teaching of Jesus who does not demand supernatural or spiritual exercises but just simple charity. Spiritual talent can easily be counterfeit and charity might appear more mundane but it is much more easily recognised and accordingly is a better test of faith. We are faced by many opportunities to help the needy. As one of our Vision objectives we have decided, as the Church in Stoke D'Abernon, to reach out to the elderly and the lonely. These acts of kindness can be provided by anybody, we need not have wealth to offer ourselves to visit, to care, to love as such things are within the reach of everybody.

In the gospel Jesus tells that those who are rewarded are surprised because they had no idea that their acts of kindness were noticed by God.

*“for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”*

They were motivated only by mercy and not by greed for reward. It has been suggested that Jesus only wanted us to be kind to other Christians,

but Jesus was never selective in his care for others and he even encouraged Christians to care for their enemies, as per the story of the Good Samaritan. Some theologians have become quite animated at the thought that people appear to be earning salvation through simple acts of kindness and charity, but to do so is to miss the point of the teaching of Jesus.

Jesus is not speaking about a literal point of judgement in the future history of the world. Jesus is stressing the need for us to take seriously his teaching on the importance of right behaviour now. In so much as people show kindness and mercy, we demonstrate the presence of God within us, and live by the standards of the kingdom. Through our behaviour we make ourselves citizens of that kingdom of Jesus today as we are one of Christ's sheep.

The faithful will see everyone as a brother or sister in Christ and will respond to the need to care for all God's children. By their deeds they will walk in the way of Jesus and will be in relationship with him, a part of his family. The unfaithful will only look after themselves and will find Christ to be far from them. If we embrace the teaching of Jesus as our King then we become part of his kingdom now and not at some judgement at the end of time. We will find the kingdom to give meaning to our lives as we know not only the joy of considering the needs of others, but the delight of serving the King.

We know that we are called to the service of others, we are also called to work to change oppressive systems and human structures that fail to serve the needy and work to relieving troubled lives and broken spirits. God's calls us to take the resources he has given us and use them for the good of all, and never to forget the weak and powerless. On Christ the King Sunday we must decide to show that Jesus Christ is our King and we must do so by having the courage and commitment to become more and more a part of the reign of God. As Anthony the Great, an early Church mystic said;

*'virtue is not far from us, nor is it without ourselves, but it is within us, and is easy if only we are willing'* (Anthony the Great). Amen.