

SERMON: 22 November 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Matthew 25:31-46

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Sermon - Sheep, Goats and Service in the Reign of God

As always context is everything. Here is Jesus, still teaching the disciples about the kingdom of heaven and about things that matter. In two days the Festival of Passover would begin and Jesus would be killed. Jerusalem would be full of sheep and goats coming to be slaughtered for the Passover. No wonder then he talks about sheep and goats.

There are some things we can safely take from this story of the sheep and goats:

1. The separation of sheep and goats takes place when the Son of Man comes in glory with the angels - End time? Post calvary?
2. Until then, both sheep and goats live together.
3. In the Middle East, then and now, it's not so easy to tell the difference between a sheep and a goat but the shepherd knows.
4. The story teaches that the sheep on the right are commended by the King on the Throne for serving Christ through their care of the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick or imprisoned whereas the goats on the left are condemned for failing to do so.

We can't, however, say that this story on it's own is enough to be the basis of a doctrine of eternal punishment or of eternal life, as some have made it out to be. I'm certain that was never Jesus' intention.

However, we're still left with the thorny question of why did Jesus use this idea of casting out the goats?

Let's look back into the ancient Hebrew Scriptures and the Law of Moses.

“The centre of gravity of the Hebrew religious calendar is the annual Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). Among the sacrifices on this day in ancient Israel, two goats played an especially important role. First the priest offered a bull and with its blood atoned for his own sins and the sins of his family. Then he selected one of the goats by lot and with its blood atoned for the sins of the people. He sent the other goat away into the wilderness, symbolising that the sins of the people were carried far from them. A later development of this practice is detailed in the Mishnah: to keep the symbolic goat from coming back into town, bringing the sins of the people with it, a man was hired to lead it to a ravine outside Jerusalem and push the goat over a cliff (Mishnah Yoma 5.3-6).”
(<https://www.andreascenter.org/Articles/Sheep%20and%20Goats.htm>)

The idea of the scapegoat is not a new idea. It's been around since ancient times. Scapegoats carry the blame. Sometimes it's warranted. Sometimes not.

This is how ancient culture dealt with the problem of sin. It was symbolically carried away into the wilderness; removed far from the people.

The Psalms cry out, as far as the East is from the West, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
(Psalm 103:12)

This story shouts of God's intention to remove sin and the one telling the story is about to do that by becoming sin for and on behalf of the people.

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
(2 Corinthians 5:21).

This is how God deals with sin. By becoming sin; by taking it and, like the scapegoat he becomes, carrying it off into the wilderness. As far as the East is from the West. That's how much God loves us and desires to be with us and for sin not to spoil that.

On the cross Jesus cried, Father forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.
(Luke 23:34)

Christ carried the sin of the world; absorbing the pain; transforming evil.

I said at the beginning that I thought that the story teaches us that a separation takes place when the Son of Man comes in glory with the angels.

Scholars have debated what Jesus might have meant by the Son of Man coming in his glory. Many assume it's about the second coming and the end of time. But some say that Jesus glorification took place on the cross; that in that moment he came to every sin laden situation that the world has or will face with the power to forgive and transform it.

What seems to be clear is that whatever separation takes place it happens after the events of that first Easter.

But this story is about caring for the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned yet its also a story for those who've ever felt they were blamed, falsely accused, or made a scapegoat. For them, there is power in this.

There is even power to become like Jesus, for example to take the heat of a situation rather than escalate it.

A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict,
but the one who is patient calms a quarrel.
(Proverbs 15:18)

Sometimes to carry that out in practice means to become a bit of a scapegoat.

Sometimes we end up absorbing the pain of a situation by refusing to bite back, take revenge, get our own way. Instead we embrace non violence and a simple lifestyle.

I'm not saying justice doesn't matter. It does. But grace triumphs justice in Christ's kingdom.

There will be a reckoning, indeed I think the reckoning is ongoing. People are being punished all the time - not because of their sins but by their sins.

God will remove evil. Goodness will triumph over evil. The cross is the central demonstration of that and is the very power to bring God's love and justice into being.

Evil finds its end at the cross. There it is defeated. There it finds its eternal punishment absorbed by the God-man Jesus and returned to us as life.

And there is power in a cross shaped life to be part of the new world God is making.

Barbara Brown-Taylor wrote that, "by entering into the experience of the cross, God took the man-made wreckage of the world inside himself and laboured with it - a long labour, almost three days - and he did not let go of it until he could transform it and return it to us as life. That is the power of a suffering God, not to prevent pain but to redeem it, by going through it with us".

(Barbara Brown-Taylor, *God in Pain* (1998)).

God isn't passively waiting to condemn some to eternal fire and others to eternal life. God in Christ is wrestling with the injustices of this world and raising up transformed, forgiven people to receive this cross shaped life to take with us into the world around us.

So then, forgiven and healed at the cross, we discover a will to go and find Christ in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned; and wherever there is a neighbour or enemy in need.

But there's another edge to all this.

Today is the Reign of Christ Sunday in the church calendar so it's appropriate to speak of what that kingdom reign looks like.

It's not like the kingdoms of this world.

The kingdoms of this world don't have as their central motif, the suffering of their king.

Christ is the Servant King, the Humble King.

This is a new form of kingship, not based on domination or empire but one that gives itself away all the time in grace, mercy and compassion.

Photo: The Homeless Jesus sculpture by Timothy P Schwalz in Toronto.

This symbolically illustrates the contrast between the imposing spires of the cathedral like church building and the homeless man sleeping on the bench outside. The only way you can see it's Jesus is from the nail marks through his bare feet.

Most of us would walk by - and miss Christ.

Whenever you did it to the least of these you did it for me.

Mercy is "the willingness to enter into the chaos of others"
(Jesuit theologian James Keenan).

And of course to do so, to enter into the chaos of others is risky and needs courage. There are so many things that work against it - we might fear it costs too much or we might lose our reputation.

But we must begin to stand up to our fears.

The writer bell hooks says this,

"To live our lives based on the principles of a love ethic (showing care, respect, knowledge, integrity, and the will to cooperate), we have to be courageous. Learning how to face our fears is one way we embrace love. Our fear may not go away, but it will not stand in the way."
(bell hooks)

God is really interested in justice and the reign of God is about building a kingdom where justice grows.

Ezekiel 34 is all about God judging between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. God hates the way some sheep muddy the waters and trash the grazing lands and even drive other sheep away.

God is determined to be the good shepherd who searches for those driven away and saves them, brings them home, feeds them, cares for them, puts in place a good shepherd to guard and guide them so that they can live in safety and peace, and make them a blessing (26) in a fruitful land where no one is in need.

Justice, mercy, grace, compassion are the hallmarks of this new kingdom, this new reign in which we are called to live in between the here now and the not yet here.

God feeds us with the justice of God whose name is Jesus.

And its Jesus that both urges us out to show mercy to others and who meets us in the need of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned

O God, you reign in Christ
Let your kingdom come
And your will be done
On earth as in heaven.

As you have found us
Move us with your compassion
To find you in the other.