

If Jesus said these words today in public, I am sure that it would have caused quite a "stushie". I am sure if it was today, He would have been quoted in all the newspapers like usual, out of context saying that He does not like "goats" as they are unreliable and that He prefers sheep to goats. And they would have picked up on the fact that He is discriminating against left hand people or as you say in good Scots "those who are corrie- fisted". Can you imagine the uproar from the animal activists?

But is this really His message? No – when we look at this in context we will understand His language and tone so much better.

Jesus is again using the language of the Old Testament, in particular the language of the Prophet Ezekiel. The Prophet Ezekiel spoke about the last judgement whereby Israel will be judged and be found "not guilty", while the Gentiles will receive the wrath of God. Ezekiel uses also sheep as symbols to Israel and goats to the Gentile nations. Why?

Well God was regarded as the Shepherd, and Israel the sheep. Most shepherds had goats and sheep which they had to treat differently. Although sheep and goats grazed together, it is said that Palestinian shepherds normally separated sheep and goats at night because goats need to be warm at night while sheep prefer open air. Sheep were more valuable than goats, and characteristics like this may have may have influenced how these terms would be heard figuratively.

Where pasture is scarce and thorny scrub dominates over grass, and where cattle are difficult to keep because of lack of good food and water, goats become important. Not only are they able to live under conditions that do not suit sheep, but they also produce large quantities of milk.

In our reading Jesus is widening the scope of those entering Gods kingdom. Israel no longer has the privileged position to be predestined to enter His kingdom. In our reading Jesus is addressing ALL the nations as equals. And in our reading ALL are treated in the same way.

It is now up to each and every individual who will be judged according to what they have done.

And then Jesus lists the things that were very important in Jewish piety. Except for visiting the imprisoned, the deeds Jesus lists are standard righteous deeds in Jewish ethics. Providing for the poor, giving hospitality to the stranger and visiting the sick were basic to Jewish piety.

And those who have done all these righteous deeds will be standing on His right hand side while the others have just one other place to stand namely

the left hand side. In biblical times the left hand was usually considered weaker than the right. It was likewise considered of ill omen. The right hand is the hand of strength, skill, and authority, the one of love and tenderness (Song 2:6; 8:3); the one which bestows the greatest blessings (Gen 48:13–18; Rev 1:17); the place of greatest favour or honour or influence (I Kgs 2:19; Mt 25:33; Ps 45:9; 109:6). Being the more important hand or side, it is the one by which a man is led (Ps 73:23); on which a man is endangered (Job 30:12; Ps 91:7) or accused (Ps 109:6; Zech 3:1); and where his protector must stand to help him (Ps 16:8; 109:31; 12:5; Isa 41:13; 63:12).

The “right hand of God” is a favourite [OT expression for His almighty power in creation \(Isa 48:13\) and in war and deliverance \(Ex 15:6, 12; Ps 17:7; 18:35; 20:6; 44:3; 78:54; 98:1; 118:16; 139:10\), as well](#) as for His sovereign beneficence (Ps 16:11; 48:10; 80:15, 17). To be seated at the right hand of God signifies the position of greatest honour, reserved only for the royal figure of Messiah (Ps 110:1).

So what is the meaning?

Jesus is using a picture which 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. Of course they expected that the sheep would be the Jews of Israel, and the goats would be everybody else.

Jesus told 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 sure fire way of ensuring success, treat your neighbour the way that you would wish to be treated. In the story Jesus tells that those who are rewarded are surprised, because they had no idea that their acts of kindness were noticed by God.

Jesus is not speaking about a literal point of judgement in the future history of the world. Rather 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, they demonstrate the presence of God within them and live by the standards of the kingdom. Through their behaviour they make themselves citizens of that kingdom of Jesus today, they are one of Christ’s sheep.

SERMON

The text verses for the sermon are:

⁴⁴ "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' ⁴⁵ "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

In the Christian calendar this Sunday signals the end of the Christian year. Next Sunday we will start with the four Sundays of Advent. This Sunday is usually designed to help Christians reflect on their past with regards to their faith in God that was made possible through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This can also be called "Kingdom Sunday" where we reflect on God's Kingdom and those who will inherit the Kingdom, hence our reading.

In our reading Jesus surprised His listeners in a big way by turning the tables on tradition. Those who will inherit the new Kingdom will not be judged upon their status as a "Jewish nation" but according to their obedience to Christ, according to what they do to others because of what He has done!

In clear language Jesus is telling us too the same thing. We have the living hope that we too will inherit the kingdom of God. If we have faith, and live our lives according to this faith we will see God face to face. We will be the proverbial sheep. In and through the redemption of Jesus Christ, we are the envoys of Christ the King: to feed the hungry, to befriend the lonely, to care for the sick, and to visit those imprisoned. Through faith alone, we have become His representatives on earth to do to others what he has done for us.

Each and everyone can now fulfil His command to love. Real love is not all about feeling - it is a responsibility, a commitment to serve others above oneself. Why? Because that is what Jesus did?

The good news is that the challenge which Jesus gives can be fulfilled by anybody. We do not need lots of money to give away, we do not need to find a cure for Cancer. Jesus simply tells his followers to be kind to one another. Look after the poor, visit the sick, give food to the hungry. We can all do this, and so we become a part of God's family.

I read an amazing story on the internet how a simple act of kindness changed the lives of a whole family.

A boy and his father were playing outside the house. The boy asked: "Dad, is there a God?"

The father had a string of answers racing through his mind. But in the end His Father opted for honesty, "I don't know, ," he replied.

Then the boy dug a little deeper, "If there is a God, how would you know him?"

"I really have no idea, the father said. I only went to church a couple of times when I was a kid, so I don't know a lot about those kinds of things."

The boy seemed deep in thought for a few minutes as the game of catch continued. Suddenly, he headed for the house.

"I'll be right, back, dad"he yelled over his shoulder.

"I have to get something."

He soon returned with a balloon fresh from the circus along with a pen and an index card.

His father asked. " what in the world are you doing?"

He earnestly replied. "I'm going to send a message to God airmail."

Before the dad could protest, the boy started writing on the index card,.....
"Dear God, if you are real and if you are there,..... send people who know you to my Dad and me."

The dad kept his mouth shutnot wanting to dampenhis son's enthusiasm. This is silly, he thoughtas he helped his son fasten the cardto the balloon's string.

After the boy let go of the balloon, father and son stood with their faces to the sky and watched it sail away. (PAUSE)

Two days later, the two of them pulled into a free car wash.

"How much?" the dad askedas he neared the line of buckets, sponges and hoses.

"It's free," the guy told him. "No strings attached."

"Really!" the dad exclaimed.

He was intrigued by getting something for nothing. "But why are you doing this?"

"We just want to show you God's love in a practical way."

It was as if that simple statementopened a hidden doorto his heart. The look on his face was incredible, "Wait a minute," he practically shouted. "Are you guys Christians?"

"Yeah, we're Christians," the man replied.

Are you the kind of Christianswho believe in God?"

The man could not help but smile, "Yes, we're that kind of Christians. After telling them his story, the dad said "I guess you're the answer to one of the strangest prayers God's ever received".

Jesus challenged his disciples and us in our Gospel reading and in many other places in the Scriptures.....To do the small thing to show the main thing: God's Love!

Can you imagine someone praying this in our Parish, and then attending the Lunch Club, or the Kosy Kaff, or the Holiday Club? Where people serve others through love alone!

Let us be mindful that our KING's crown was of thorns, not of jewels. He was born in a stable, not a palace. He ate with sinners and tax collectors, not dukes and lords.

He wore a simple robe, not expensive clothes.

He was a different kind of king, and He is calling you and me to be a different kind of people – serving Him, as we serve others.

Amen

[OT](#) Old Testament