

Sermon 22 November 2020 Thanksgiving and Loss/Christ the King (Matthew 25.31-end)

If today's service is packaged as one which is a gift to our community and to our cultural moment; tapping into the broad sense in which we have lost so much this year; but might also have found things for which to be thankful; how does that square with today's Christ the King gospel: our Lord's description of the Last Judgement illustrated with the sheep and the goats? The gospel reading presents us with either exultant thanksgiving if one finds oneself to be a sheep, on the right hand; or catastrophic loss if one finds oneself on the left, as a goat!

Many people have lost much this year, whether health or livelihood or plans and celebrations cancelled or indeed lost a loved-one. At the same time, many have been thankful for the NHS and other key workers or thankful for myriad examples of neighbourliness and kindness or hopeful about really tackling climate change or racial injustice at last. It has been a more nuanced and varied picture than either total loss or total gain. And for those who have died or who mourn, whose loss is most profound, we would want to hold out the hope of heaven. Surely, we would not want to portray and preach a God who classifies many as goats, as lost and gone?

What, then, might be the place for this striking gospel passage at this time? Straightaway, I plead the injustice of the negative designation given to the left; I am left-handed; just as some out there may always have been very fond of goats! But more can be said about rights and wrongs and justice and injustice and so I want to suggest two ways to hear this gospel reading.

First, something about justice. Whether it is our Lord here or really the overwhelming prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, justice is for the weak. Think how often the Law and prophets plead the cause of the alien, the orphan and the widow. Think about the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the prisoner. Those who have power already have justice and have things their way; the justice we and the Church should care about, the justice of God, fights the corner precisely of those who are shut out and excluded. Therefore, see how an apparently negative picture of God turns out to be good news for the oppressed; in today's terms, good news for the earth, the poor, ethnicities and minorities who are persecuted or discriminated against.

Second, something about those called to be sheep, which takes me right back to the beginning of my Christian journey. I still vividly remember the first time

I heard this gospel; in Keble College, Oxford, Christ the King 2002. I was entranced by the invitation to see and serve Christ in the least of the members of his family. This wasn't just some theoretical commitment I was soon to make in Confirmation; this wasn't some distant belief of what would happen when I die; no, it was a rallying call to a life of love and service. And isn't this partly what we have seen these past months: those who have started and supported Merton Mutual Aid or the Dons Local Action Group; those who have volunteered to help the NHS; those who contribute to the Food Bank or Care for Calais refugee support group; those who are about to volunteer once more for the Winter Night Shelter. Here are sheep of many kinds, who profess Christ or a different god or none, but who serve the least of their brothers and sisters.

As Christians, surely we want to be of this number; and does it not, in fact, excite us? To be of use to our fellows; that in showing kindness we demonstrate we are of the same kind, we are all brothers and sisters. Thank God that this has not been lost in 2020: our common humanity; and pray God, that at the start of a new Church year, we will be reinvigorated, will be stirred up to serve Christ in those in need. Amen.

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