

# Sheep and the Goats (8th October 2023)

Homelessness Sunday at Great St Mary's Cambridge

## Opening Prayer

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer.

## Introduction

One of my favourite sweets that I enjoy and indulge in from time to time are Rowntrees Fruit Gums. They are so chewy, as well as, of course, being full of lots of sugar. The only problem is, though, that of the five flavours - strawberry, orange, lime, lemon and blackcurrant - I only like four of them. I don't like the blackcurrant ones. When I open a pack I pour it all out onto a table top or a plate and I literally spend a minute putting the blackcurrants to one side and away from all the others. Sometimes they go into the bin, sometimes my wife will have them because they are her favourite, and sometimes (if I'm not careful) our dog will eat the whole pack! I separate the ones I like from the ones I don't based on taste...if only the blackcurrant ones tasted better they'd have a chance of me eating them! You perhaps do this with other foods that you might enjoy, or not enjoy.

In a much more significant sense, Jesus is describing in this parable the reality of the future judgement and separation of sheep and goats; not based on taste, as I do with blackcurrants, but rather, based on what they have done.

## Who's who?

There's a lot in this parable, with multiple different characters appearing in it, so let me just quickly run through who they are, as the vast majority of Christian theologians through the centuries have understood the identity of each of them.

First we have the **Son of Man** - that is Jesus, as the judge and king.

Second we have the **sheep and the goats** - as the righteous on the right and unrighteous on the left. Sheep in ancient Israel were often considered much more valuable and precious than goats. Being on the right was a sign of approval and of acceptance before royalty. Hence the precious, valuable ones in Jesus' Kingdom are welcomed to his right.

Then we have **the least of the members of the family** - these are those in life and society who are poor, homeless, foodless, waterless and on the breadline

## We express our salvation and we do not earn it

We could easily be mistaken if when reading this parable, we think that one earns their way into eternal life based on what one does to the least of the members of Jesus' family. I want to caution against this reading as it is not only a misunderstanding of what is being said in this specific context, but also, in reading it this way, it misses one of the key underlying ethical imperatives throughout the whole of Matthew's Gospel.

We do not earn our way to eternal life through doing good to people. Rather we get to express our receiving of the promise of eternal life in how we do good to people.

We don't earn eternal life. We express eternal life because of Jesus' death.

The parable is not about how many good deeds of mercy, love and compassion you have done to earn a reward but about how you express to other people the person you now are, in the light of the resurrection, to other people because you've already received the reward!

## What kind of person are you?

One of the primary questions that Jesus' teaching in Matthew's Gospel asks of its readers is - what kind of person are you?

In various ways Jesus prods and pokes at this question throughout Matthew. Here in this parable the focus is on what kind of person are you towards those who are without many of the things we have and take for granted.

## Cambridge today...

You may or may not know that Cambridge is the most socio-economically divided city in the UK and now one of the most socio-economically divided in Europe. In other words, the gap between the richest and the poorest in this world-renowned city is greater than in many other cities. I don't know where you might fit on this spectrum, though among the poorest of course are those who are without a home and live on the streets or at night shelters.

It is so easy to dismiss or overlook the person sitting in the shop door on a Sunday morning when arriving at church. So easy to not look at them, let alone speak with them, when you walk past them. It is perhaps even rarer still that we pause in our journey to somewhere to be with them for a few minutes.

"They are drunk, they are dishevelled, they are depressed, they are in debt, they need deodorant" - these are just some of the thoughts that may pop through our heads.

What kind of person are they?  
How would you know?

What kind of person are you?  
How would they know?

## Nazareth Manifesto

Sam Wells in his book "A Nazareth Manifesto" describes four different ways that Christians often approach and engage with poverty. In response to seeing a homeless person in the centre of our city we might say:

1. "We need to get people off the streets into housing, employment, and a profitable use of time" This might be your thought when seeing someone homeless. You then might offer to volunteer at a night shelter, buy them a sandwich or drink, offer any professional skills you may have or lobby the local authorities with others to get them to do something about it.

- Sam Wells calls this **working for** simply because you are working for a person. The homeless person is a participant not an instigator.

2. Or, you chat with the person to get an understanding of why they are homeless. You then ensure they know where the local access surgery is, and where the rehab centres, career advice and drop in centres are.

- Sam Wells calls this **working with** because it has the energy of the first option of tackling the barriers, but doing so with the homeless person, as they are involved as a participant.

3. Or, you take time to sit down beside the person and pass some time with them - discovering one another's name, life stories, what its like being out at night, what they think of people rushing past and not paying attention to them. Then conversation moves onto talking about interests and concerns in sport, politics, culture, the city. You discover the wealth of wisdom they have which you don't.

- Sam Wells calls this **being with** because you are simply beside the person for a cuppa and a chat. There is genuine encounter but both are equally involved. It is not working either for or with, because you are being with them as a human **being** and not a human **doing**.

4. Or, you become angry that there are so many homeless people so you take to social media and post about it, and have as a goal that whenever people encounter those who are homeless they are informed through your social media campaign that judgements and assumptions aren't made in respect of any addictions, substance abuse or poor choices. You become enraged at the system - at the government, the council, the wider culture.

- Sam Wells calls this **being for** because you never encounter a homeless person at all. All the judgements and decisions you make on what you say in your campaigns is information you get second or third hand. You are concerned though for their wellbeing and others in similar situations.

Sam goes on to argue in the remainder of his book that whilst there is a place for "*working for, working with and being for, it is **being with** that is the most faithful form of Christian witness and mission, because being with is both incarnationally faithful to the manifestation of God in Christ and eschatologically anticipatory of the destiny of all things in God.*" (Wells, p.23)

We of course know of the reality of God coming to be with us in Jesus, Immanuel (God with us), as a newborn baby at the start of Matthew's Gospel.

We of course know of the promise that Jesus would always be with his disciples to the very end of the age at the end of Matthew's Gospel.

We profess in the creed too that Christ will come again to be with us to judge the living and the dead.

If **being with** then is the most faithful way that we can demonstrate the mission of the Church, before Jesus returns to separate the sheep from the goats, it then begs the question being asked of each of us, I think, today...

How are you being with people who are homeless?

When was the last time you stopped to have a conversation with someone and have a cuppa with them? Have you ever?

For each of us today will you consider how you might from here find ways of not just working for, working with, or being for those who are homeless but also, and perhaps most importantly, being with them.

With the forewarning, of a future 'one judgement of all people' a present reality in this passage, it is the mission of the Church to proclaim the coming of this judgement, doing so in the confidence of Jesus' promise to always be with us (1:23, 28:10). Within this reality the Church must ask herself, is the Church being shaped by Jesus' teaching and building, like the wise man upon the rock (7:24-27) who is able to withstand the final judgement. It is the Church's role in mission to ask of each person in the world where they themselves are building, before the judgement that is surely coming at Christ's second coming.

We can be with others in love, mercy and compassion because God in Christ has come to be with us, is with us now by His Spirit, and will come again in Christ to be with us. There, he will separate not the blackcurrant from the other sweets....but the sheep from the goats.

In a few moments we will sing these words. Today I wonder whether these words might for each of us be a prayer in response to how we might go and be with others;

*God of the poor, friend of the weak,  
give us compassion, we pray:  
melt our cold hearts, let tears fall like rain.  
Come, change our love from a spark to a flame.*