

The Shepherd King
Matthew 25:31-46
November 22, 2020

Today we arrive at the last Sunday of the church year. Throughout chapter twenty-four and into chapter twenty-five Jesus teaches watchfulness. We need to be ready for his appearing is the message of the ten bridesmaid's parable, the parable of the talents and this parable of the final judgment. How do we interpret this parable?

After all, the whole parable seems to reach its climax when the Son of Man, who comes in glory, dismisses the unrighteous to eternal fire. But Jesus shares this parable on the way to the cross. Indeed, these are his last words before the beginning of his passion: *When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples: You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified. Perhaps his "coming in glory" teaches us that this is truly revealed in the cross. Of course, it also points us forward to his appearing in glory at the end of history.*

Before we engage that question, I want us to realize that the theme of shepherd is prominent in all of our readings today. We also need to be aware that Matthew is drawing on the apocalyptic writings of Daniel that we read today. Remember his description: *As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. (Daniel 7:13ff)*

So there are no surprises as to where Matthew got his inspiration for this parable of the last judgment. He alone includes this in his gospel. The imagery of Christ in the throne room with glory and power ruling over all peoples is right out of Daniel chapter seven. Similarly, Matthew's imagery of the shepherd dividing the sheep from the goats is straight out of Ezekiel's vision of God as shepherd: *As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord God: I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats (Ezekiel 34:17ff)* But what does it mean for us today?

I suppose it depends how much you like surprises. Surprise, after all, lies at the heart of this parable. Both those identified as sheep and as goats are **surprised** by what Jesus says. Those who addressed the needs of the hungry, the needy, the prisoner, and sick were blessed and welcomed into the kingdom. But those who didn't respond to these needs were judged and excluded from the kingdom.

What's interesting is that neither group expected to see God in the faces of the disadvantaged, the poor, the imprisoned and all those in need. When we think of God we think of power, heavenly throne, glory and might. And that's where the parable begins, with Christ enthroned in glory. So, what the parable suggests, above other things, is that if we seek God's presence, we should expect to meet Christ in prison, among the hungry, the sick, the lost. Just as he is the good shepherd, he calls us to be shepherds to those who have wandered and lost, and who are in need of help.

But surely this ought not be a surprise! After all God didn't visit the human family in Rome or Athens. God came to us in an obscure village in a backwater of the empire, and as a baby born to two peasant folks. Jesus' life and ministry follows this pattern. He reaches out to those on the margins, who are vulnerable and broken and have no power: women, lepers, publicans and sinners, the blind, the sick and the dead. He lives out Ezekiel's prophecy of the good shepherd, who comes to find the lost and bring them home. It is the poor who heard him gladly, not the rich and powerful.

The other response to this parable is probably **Yikes!** A range of interpretations is offered on the parable. I offer two here.

First, it is a bold reminder that we cannot sit comfortably with the thought that we are God's only fold of sheep and because of our faith are safe from judgment. Yes, we are justified by faith, as our Reformed heritage claims. But James reminds us that **faith without works is dead**. A genuine, living faith works itself out in all of life and responds with compassion to the neighbour. Faith in Jesus, the New Testament everywhere preaches, causes us to live out a new ethic that runs counter to society's self-obsession.

Second, what is Matthew picturing here? The phrase translated ‘all the nations’ cannot mean everyone in the world. Had Matthew wanted to say ‘everyone’ he would have used another word for ‘all’. But he uses a technical word meaning Gentiles or all the non-Jewish people in the world. This would mean that those called forth as sheep and goats in this vision of the end judgment are those outside the Jewish faith. It would exclude Jews, Jewish Christians and hence Christians. We may not like that interpretation as it seems then to undermine the need for Christians to be active in service to the needy. But surely there is ample evidence in the Gospels and elsewhere that tell Christians how they ought to serve their neighbour. And if this is the proper interpretation then what is Matthew saying to us?

The surprise experienced by both the sheep and the goats tells us that both that those who were compassionate and those who ignored the needy were unaware they were responding to Jesus Christ. The sheep in the parable, in short, act as if they are in relationship with Jesus, even if they are disconnected from the Christian community. They act as if they are “Christians”. They are in a sense “anonymous Christians”. If this is what Matthew is getting at then it offers us encouragement to view those outside our church as Christian brothers and sisters who live out this ethic of love and compassion. Such a view will require an openness on our part that perhaps will challenge our tribe mentality.

Finally, what does this last judgment scene really speak about? The parable begins with the words: *When the Son of Man comes in his glory...* it ends with Jesus pointing his disciples toward Jerusalem where crucifixion is the end game. Is the cross where Jesus comes in his glory? Is this where we see Jesus most clearly? However, we interpret this parable it bears remembering that the same one who will one day come to judge is the same one who first came to be judged for us. He became sin for us, as Peter will remind us in his letter: *He used his servant body to carry our sins to the Cross so we could be rid of sin, free to live the right way. His wounds became your healing. You were lost sheep with no idea who you were or where you were going. Now you're named and kept for good by the Shepherd of your souls. (1Peter 2:21ff The Message)*

He is the shepherd king who asks us to follow his path. Jesus wants us to be his hands and arms to wrap around those in need. Our relationship with Christ doesn't permit us to live in isolation from those around us. The message of Jesus and of the Gospels is that faith always lives out in compassionate service to those in need. If nothing else these passages today shout this message loud and clear.

I couldn't help chuckle at Hollywood's notion of a saviour of the world in the film **Fifth Element**. In it the world is threatened by evil which is hours away from gobbling up all life into its self. But a life force called the fifth element, when combined with the stones representing fire, wind, water and earth, has the potential to defeat the evil force and save the universe. As it turns out the saviour, or fifth element, happens to be a perfectly structured blond who mumbles away in an ancient language only the priesthood understands. And of course, she is able in the end to be the medium to blast this evil monster to kingdom come.

It's this kind of wild scenario that informs this passage. What we have here is what is commonly referred to in biblical studies as 'apocalyptic literature'. In short, Matthew, like other writers in the New Testament and in the Old Testament, is setting forth a view of the end in extravagant terms, in bold language and colourful imagery. With all such styles of writing we must be careful not to treat it literally. This is symbolic, dramatic picture language to get across a vision of the end of the world.

Like so many science fiction films apocalyptic writing moves in a similar vein. But of course, in the bible quite a different picture of the end is presented. In Scripture the Saviour of the world is Christ the Lord. There is evil that has fought against the forces of good since the beginning of time. But in the bible this moment is described Christ coming on the clouds with his angels to judge the world. That's how this story opens, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory." What an awesome picture of Christ's Sovereignty and power! On this Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the year, this is a bold vision of a conquering hero, the king of the universe!

Amen