

MATTHEW 25:31-46
ST JOHN'S, 26.11.17, 9.30 am,

INTRODUCTION

'Be prepared'! Anyone who's been a Boy Scout or a Girl Guide will be very familiar with those words! A couple of weeks ago, you might remember that we were thinking about the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. In that parable, at the beginning of this chapter, Jesus was telling us that we need to be prepared for his return. Here, at the end of the chapter, Jesus tells us *how* we can prepare ourselves for his return, how we can show that we *are* ready to meet him.

THE KING ON HIS THRONE

Who is the King?

But before we think about that, I want us to spend a few minutes thinking about the scene which Jesus describes in this passage. First, he describes *the Son of Man coming as King and all the angels with him; he sits on his royal throne and divides all the nations . . . into two groups*. Jesus is alluding to various OT passages. The most familiar one is Daniel 7, in which Daniel has a vision, of *one like a son of man* approaching the throne of *the Ancient of Days*, and receiving *authority, glory and sovereign power*. Daniel ends his description with these words: *his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*"

The other OT passages to which Jesus is alluding are also scenes in which 'the LORD your God' is the judge. Jesus calmly and deliberately claims that God the Father has given *him* the authority to judge 'all the nations'.

Jesus says that when he judges us, he will divide us into two groups, *just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats* (v 32). Jesus is the King; he's also like a shepherd. In Palestine, shepherds often have mixed flocks, of sheep and goats. The sheep and goats look very similar to each other on the outside; but there are times when the shepherd has to separate them. Although they look so alike, the shepherd knows his flock so well that he has no problem in dividing them into the two groups. In the same way, Jesus the King, will have no problem in dividing the nations into righteous people and the others.

Jesus says that he'll judge us according to the ways in which we've taken care of *the least important of these members of my family* (v40). In some way, Jesus the King is present in each and every Christian believer. None of us can recognise him: the sheep are just as surprised to hear that they've given food, drink, hospitality, clothes, and care to Jesus, as the goats are surprised to hear that they've neglected Jesus.

So in this story, Jesus teaches us that he is the King; he'll come in glory, and he'll judge each and every one of us. He'll have no problem in sorting out the sheep from the goats. And the basis of Jesus' judgment will be our treatment of our fellow believers, because that shows our attitude to Jesus himself.

Jesus is our King. Jesus is our Judge. Jesus is our shepherd. And Jesus is already here among us.

‘SHEEP ON THE RIGHT!’

Who are the sheep? The sheep are the righteous people, the people who are blessed by God the Father.

In the OT there are various passages where sheep are used as a picture of God’s people. One of the most familiar comes in Psalm 100: *Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture* (Psalm 100:3). So Jesus’ listeners would have been familiar with the picture Jesus uses here, of sheep representing God’s people.

How do the sheep show that they are sheep? Remember that the sheep and the goats look very similar on the outside. Superficially, there’s nothing to choose between the righteous and the unrighteous. But, says Jesus, both groups have given themselves away by the way they behave. The righteous have treated even the least important Christian believer with great love and compassion, sharing food, water, shelter, clothes and so on. By doing all these things, the sheep express both how much they love Jesus, and how much Jesus loves each and every Christian believer, no matter how unimportant that person is in the eyes of the world.

Where are the sheep going? The sheep are going to *possess the kingdom which has been prepared for you ever since the creation of the world* (v 34). They’re going *to eternal life*. Two weeks’ ago, we were thinking of the picture of heaven as Jesus’ wedding feast. There are lots of other pictures throughout the NT of what the righteous are going to enjoy after the final judgment.

‘GOATS ON THE LEFT!’

Who are the goats? The goats are *the others* (v 33), those who are *under God’s curse* (v 41). They’re placed on Jesus’ left, which in itself is a sign of disfavour. If the sheep are God’s people, the goats are clearly those people who don’t belong to God. Notice that they’re surprised to find themselves in this position. They were *expecting* to be counted among God’s people, among the sheep, just as the foolish virgins were expecting to take part in the bridal procession and the wedding feast. Remember that the sheep and goats look very similar on the outside. There’ll be lots of surprises on judgment day!

How do the goats show that they are goats? Many of the goats are probably not people we’d think of as being evil or wicked. Jesus doesn’t say that they’ve done anything particularly bad. But he does say that the goats have failed to do right. They’ve failed to treat the least important Christian believers with love and compassion. They’ve failed to share food, water, shelter, clothes and so on. They might be people who are considered to be ‘high up’ in Christian circles; but sucking up to the Bishop cuts no ice with Jesus. Jesus looks at the way we treat our fellow Christians, and especially the way we treat those whom the world considers to be least important.

Where are the goats going? In verse 41, Jesus sends the goats *away from me* . . . People who Jesus judges to be *under God’s curse* are sent out of Jesus’ presence. Like the foolish virgins, they’ll be shut out of the party. The goats will have forfeited their opportunity to enjoy being with God for ever.

Jesus sends the 'goats' to the *eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels* (v 41). It wasn't prepared for human beings. God never intended for any of us to end up in that fire, only the devil and his angels. But Jesus warns us here, that if we fail to take his teaching seriously, that's what will happen to us.

CONCLUSION

Are you a sheep or a goat? In Jesus' story, neither group realised what they were doing! But analogies break down if you take them too far, and I don't believe Jesus wants his people to doubt that they truly are his people.

Jesus defines eternal life like this in John 17:3: *Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*

If we have this relationship with Jesus, then the Holy Spirit is living in us, and we are producing spiritual fruit. And *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control* (Galatians 5:22-23).

Jesus will judge us according to our actions. But our actions are simply the outward signs of what's going on inside us. If we're true believers, then the fruit of the spirit is growing in our lives. If the fruit of the Spirit is growing in our lives, then we won't be able to help loving our Christian brothers and sisters. And if we love them, then we'll share food, water, shelter, clothes and so on.

So its not a case of 'share food, water, shelter, clothes and so on, and you will get to heaven', but rather a case of 'people who are going to heaven do share food, water, shelter, clothes and so on'.

What if you're worried that you're a goat? Well, don't despair! Real goats can't change into real sheep; but spiritual goats can change into spiritual sheep, with the LORD's help! And he's longing to give you that help! I'm only too willing to talk to anyone who finds themselves in that position. You've probably got believing friends who could help you as well. Above all, talk to the LORD!

Finally, whether you think you're a goat, or whether you know you're a sheep but you're still feeling daunted, may I suggest you do two things? One: ask God to pour his love into you, so that you *can* show how much you love him by the way you act towards the 'least important' of your Christian brothers and sisters; and two: remember that God loves *you*, and that if you ask him, he *will* forgive you for the times you fail to live up to his standards.