

Matthew 25:31-46

I grew up on a farm and one year my father had a bright idea to winter some sheep for extra income. It was my first experience with sheep, but it turned out much as I had expected:

- Gentle animals
- Don't bend over to untie a bale of hay when the Ram is behind you
- And, yes, they do tend to wander

My older brother, who was becoming a farmer, decided right away that we would buy more cattle, so the experiment didn't last very long, and my father did not make a fortune, alas. But I decided I knew as much about sheep as was necessary.

You will forgive my frequent references to Malawi, but one day I was in a village and a farmer said, "Come, and see my sheep." Well, they weren't really sheep, I thought. In fact, they looked more like goats: same colour, same size more or less. Only when I got close could I see the differences and the major difference was the tail – a thick, flat tail that just hung down.

Tropical sheep can come in many varieties but they are generally raised for meat and not fleece.

The major ethnic group in Malawi has an ancient tradition concerning sheep. If you want to really impress the Chief, you hold up a sheep's tail and say, "Your excellency, I greet you with the fat of a sheep's tail!"

As the royal chef begins her work, it's best not to think too much about where that tail has been.

And, yes, I will eventually get to the point: if one thinks of a more tropical setting, ***it is not so easy to separate the sheep from the goats – not as obvious as one may think.***

I also want to thank Heidi who did some valuable research last week when she preached about the Parable of the Talents. It seems that Parable had a particular focus on the Gentile population.

So with the Parable of the 10 Bridesmaids that opened Chapter 25 of Matthew. There is a harsh, even cruel, element of judgment that shocks us somewhat. Where is the grace? The second chance? The hope of forgiveness?

Judgement is a major theme in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew, of the 4 Gospel writers, is the most concerned with the continuity between the hope of Israel and the revelation of Jesus as Messiah. What will happen to those not ready or willing to accept Jesus, but are still part of the Covenant people? What of 'good people' who do not believe?

All 3 parables in Matthew 25, then, deal with these issues by alerting the hearer that judgment is near.

The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats seems to lack something, though. No one seems to know why they were divided the way they were into two groups – who may not look as distinct as we might have thought.

The sentence of the Judge is also a shock. The evidence is of an ethical nature relating to the Judge himself.

- Where and when did we do – or not do – all these good works.
- And even so, we never noticed any judge watching us.

The absence of any awareness of who Jesus is, even among the blessed, the absence of a concept of grace or faith, all muddy the waters.

Yes, this may be a final judgment, but is it ***THE Final judgment.***

This Parable would seem to answer one question we all ask: what happens to all those good people who do not believe in God yet who live lives ethically superior to those who do acknowledge him as Lord? The answer seems to be that they will ***be judged on the basis of their compassion for the least of these.***

This Parable concludes Jesus' public ministry, but it does not end the Gospel. Matthew 26 begins with the plot to kill Jesus and takes us to his Passion.

Can we say this? Matthew is now presenting the Jesus community with an even greater question. Do we see the eternal purposes of God revealed in the Cross? And if we do, what are the implications for us?

They certainly can be no less than those demanded in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. The ethical standards of the Judeo-Christian tradition are very high indeed. But there is much more.

1. How far does faith take us? We see in the 12 Disciples the crisis of faith: betrayal, denial, flight.
2. We see how difficult it is to believe the promises of Jesus when we are faced with the threat of torture and death.
3. Where is God in all this anyway? How can this loving God let the innocent, the faithful suffer?
4. Is Jesus really the One or should we wait for another?
5. Or, like Peter, maybe if we just go fishing things will sort themselves out.

Living the ethical life should be enough shouldn't it? Look at the US election: if all the politicians were basically ethical, there wouldn't be this mess.

We have good laws in Canada, if people simply obeyed them, peace would ensue.

If the Government had a more ethical system of protecting all citizens equally, we would be a happier land.

And there is no argument with that. We would be better and happier people. But would this solve the deeper existential question we all face? **Questions of meaning, purpose, eternity – the ache of the soul.**

Who is this person Jesus and why do we prefer he not look us straight in the eye? Is it because we know that we cannot simply stand before his throne and present our CV with appropriate commendations from 3 notable people?

There's something more . . . it was a Roman Centurion in Matthew's account of the Crucifixion who first uttered these words: Truly, this man was God's son.'

Matthew tells us we need to live the final chapters of his Gospel. We have to confront again and again, "Who do you, who do I, say he is?"

How we answer that question takes us beyond ethics to discipleship.

It also takes us beyond saying who Jesus is, to living the life of the disciple.

There are deep ethical issues facing the world today: Issues of gender, equality, poverty, climate - all extremely important and we need to be involved in this process.

We pray for good people to make good decisions and do the right thing.

But for us, there is more. Do we see both the Judgment and Salvation of the world in Jesus Christ? If so, as Jesus told Peter, we may be taken to places we'd rather not go.

We leave Matthew's Gospel as we move towards Advent. The cycle begins again – it begins, as it ends, in the mystery of the Triune God's love for Creation.

It is a mystery, but once apprehended, it seems simple in a way. Even a child can lead us.