

THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS

MATTHEW 25:31-46

Justice & Righteousness Series

OPENING PRAYER

Holy One, Forgive me the times when I miss an opportunity to show your compassion in the world; open my heart to my neighbours and to all your creation, not in fear of your judgement but out of love for you. Amen

EXEGESIS

This passage opens with a reference to the 'Son of Man', or more inclusively, 'child of humanity'. This is a title which is traceable especially to the books of Daniel and Ezekiel, where it is used by God and angels to mean 'O human being'. 'Son of Man' is used by Jesus himself, particularly in Mark's Gospel, to refer obliquely and in a humble way, to himself. It is also used, as in today's passage, as a messianic title, here anticipating the end times when this envoy of God will come back to inaugurate the reign of God. The situation described is of a final judgement, according to deeds.

Interpretations of this text vary depending on theological stance: for some, this is a judgement of people outside the Christian faith, who will be held accountable for their deeds rather than hope to attain salvation through faith in Jesus as Lord. To others, this is a passage which applies to everybody, Christian or not. Texts which contribute to this debate include Paul's writings about law and grace in Romans 1-3, particularly from a Lutheran understanding, compared with the teachings in the Letter of James, that 'faith without works is dead' (James 2:14-26), and Acts 10:34-35, where Peter is quoted as saying, 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.'

A second messianic reference in the passage is to sheep and goats. Shepherding occurs frequently in the Jewish Scriptures, as a metaphor for leadership. Ezekiel 34, in particular, extends the metaphor, describing the leaders of Israel and Judah as false shepherds who do not care for their flocks, and then speaking about God as the shepherd, and about a 'good shepherd' appointed by God. This image of the good shepherd is used about Jesus in all four Gospels. While two passages in Matthew's Gospel (10:6 and 15:24) suggest that Jesus' ministry was initially only within his own Jewish faith- reaching out to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel'- we also find universalist strands, where God's care and leadership extends to all peoples of the world - for example Isaiah 56:1-8 and Luke 24:44-47.

REFLECTION

This passage makes a distinction not only between those who have compassion and those

who do not, but between those who are in a position to help, and those who are in need. The 'least' live at the mercy of others, pressured into particular behaviours due to circumstances. Their choices are severely limited. Their existence implies the contrasting status of 'the greatest'. Judgement, it seems, weighs more heavily on those who have more choice: abundance to share, time to spare, and resources with which to be benevolent.

God as 'judge' is not necessarily a comfortable image. Christians are often quick to talk about forgiveness and grace – and with justification, for example Luke 24:44-47. But the biblical path to forgiveness is in waking up to our personal responsibility and desiring to change – take, for example, the concept of 'metanoia' or repentance, proclaimed as the good news in Mark 1:14-15; or the account of Zacchaeus' change of heart in Luke 19:1-10. It seems from this passage that the safest path to avoiding judgement altogether is not to be someone who gives a little, does a little good, but actually to be someone who is poor, oppressed, and dependant on the goodness of others – the place Jesus puts himself.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who do you identify with most strongly in this passage? How does it make you feel?
2. How do you prefer to interpret the passage, taking the exegetical comment into account, about grace, faith and works?

CLOSING PRAYER

Holy One, Let me never despise those who seem to be your little ones; rather, free me from judgements and let me be humbled, recognising those who live with generosity and courage, love and faithfulness as my teachers and guides. Amen.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- 'Rejoice with Me: Hope for Lost Sheep', Annie Heppenstall, 2013, Kevin Mayhew Ltd, Suffolk
- 'Good Goats: Healing our Image of God', Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, Matthew Linn, 1994, Paulist Press