



+ ◦ TAKEAWAY ◦ SUNDAY SERMON

26th November 2023, 26th Sunday after Pentecost,

The least of these by Rev Dr Jordan Redding

Ezekiel 34:11-24

¹¹ “For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. ¹² As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. ¹³ I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. ¹⁴ I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. ¹⁶ I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

¹⁷ “As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats. ¹⁸ Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you also trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you also muddy the rest with your feet? ¹⁹ Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied with your feet?

²⁰ “Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says to them: See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them

away, ²² I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. ²³ I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. ²⁴ I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.

Matthew 25:31-46: The Sheep and the Goats

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴ “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

³⁷ “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

⁴⁰ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

⁴¹ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’

⁴⁴ “They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

⁴⁵ “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’

⁴⁶ “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

The least of these

It is the final Sunday of the year of Matthew. And we finish with a real humbinger of a parable that I'm sure has us all shifting uncomfortably in our seats.

As we heard, it's a parable that describes a final day of judgement when Christ, the Son of Man, will gather up all the peoples of the world and separate the righteous from the unrighteous, like a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Apparently.

The righteous we're told will be granted eternal life with God. The unrighteous will be sent away to an eternal punishment of fire "prepared by the devil and his angels."

It's this parable and passages like it that underpin the idea that there will be a final judgement after which some of us will go to heaven and eternal paradise, while others will suffer eternal torment in hell. And that the basis for going one way or the other is the sum total of our good and bad deeds throughout life. When you read the parable, you have to say, it's a fair and valid reading of the text – as difficult, as abhorrent, as it may seem to our modern ears.

Such an idea is deeply ingrained both in Christianity and in the wider popular consciousness. And when people reject Christianity, I've noticed, it's often this idea that they're rejecting. That this supposedly good God would send a whole lot of people to hell simply because weren't good enough.

And to be honest, I sympathise with them. Because when you dig beneath the surface, the logic behind this parable is problematic when taken in a literal way.

For instance, which one of us hasn't walked past someone who was hungry or thirsty and done nothing? Which one of us hasn't kept our door closed to a stranger in need or not visited those who are sick and in prison?

By the standards of this parable, we are all goats deserving of an eternal punishment of fire. Hence why, if you're like me, you can't help feel a bit uneasy when you hear this parable.

Conversely, which one of us hasn't acted generously at times? Which one of us hasn't reached into our pockets to give to worthy causes? Which one of us hasn't showed kindness and compassion in response to need? Even the most self-centred of us are capable of kindness and generosity and acts of beauty.

I guess, what I'm suggesting is, we're all sheep and we're all goats. And it seems arbitrary at best to think that God would separate us into "sheep" and "goats" based on a certain ratio of good to bad deeds.

And that of course is to say nothing of the fact that such litigious bookkeeping of our good and bad deeds seems entirely at odds with the God of grace revealed in Jesus

Christ. A God who in Christ is intent on reconciling the world to himself in spite of anything we do or don't do. Even if it kills him. That's grace.

And it doesn't square with our parable today. So what do we do with it? How are we supposed to interpret it?

In reflecting on this parable, I'm going to take a more unconventional approach. But I hope that I'll be able to show why I take such an approach. And there's opportunity for further dialogue as we grapple with this very difficult passage together.

I want to begin by leaving our parable behind for a moment and dipping into our Old Testament reading from the prophet Ezekiel, also a kind of parable. Did you notice the similarities between our passages today?

Both talk about God as a Shepherd, who will gather together his flock. And that once the flock are gathered together a judgement will take place, whereby the flock will be separated. In both cases, the unrighteous will be sent away – in Ezekiel to destruction, and in Matthew to eternal punishment.

There's enough similarities in the text that it's fair to assume Jesus had this passage from Ezekiel in mind when he told the parable.

But there are some notable differences. For instance, given its Old Testament context, Ezekiel is talking specifically about Israel. The gathering of the flock is a metaphor of the restoration of the people of Israel who had been scattered throughout the diaspora of Babylon. The Shepherd is leading them back to Mt Zion and to flourishing life with God.

Jesus takes this same idea but broadens it out. Now, the judgement includes "all the nations of the earth" – all people's everywhere. It's universal in scope. So that's the first difference.

It's also important to note that, for Ezekiel, the outcome of the judgement is not eternal life or punishment *after we die*. There's no sense in Ezekiel that he's talking about heaven and hell in the way we popularly conceive them.

For Ezekiel, the concern is much more "this-worldly". His concern is for a flourishing human society in which all – including the last, the lost, and the least – are cared for, protected, and enabled to live a good life.

As I said, Ezekiel was writing at a time when the people of Israel were coming back from being scattered throughout the Babylonian Empire. Under the Persians, they more or less had freedom to govern themselves.

And Ezekiel saw an opportunity. He saw an opportunity to build a society from the ground up. He saw an opportunity to address systemic issues and social inequality.

He saw an opportunity to help the people imagine a world shaped by God's generous love for all people, especially the down and out.

Just hear some of these words from Ezekiel:

“I will seek the lost, I will bring back the strays, I will bind up the injured, I will strengthen the weak; I will feed them with good pasture, and I will make them lie down.”

A remarkable humanitarian vision.

And yet. At the heart of Ezekiel's parable is a hard truth. He realised that to implement such a vision, the people would need to bring an end to dehumanising ways of treating one another. Extortion, greed, and usury. These things and the systems that allowed them needed to be dismantled. In order to create a safe space for the weak, injured, and lean sheep, the people needed to have zero tolerance for the bullying behaviour of the strong and fat sheep, who “pushed with flank and shoulder at the weak until they were scattered far and wide.”

In short, a flourishing society for all required justice and a setting right of the unjust behaviours and systems that created the problems in the first place.

It's fair to assume to think that Jesus had this Ezekiel passage in mind when he told this parable. Certainly, his Jewish listeners would have had that passage in mind. And therefore, I don't think it's unreasonable to interpret Jesus' parable in the same way.

In other words – and this gets to the heart of what I want to say –when Jesus talks about eternal life and eternal punishment in this parable, he is not talking about where we'll end up after we die. I think the Bible certainly does talk about life after death. But I don't think that's what this passage is saying.

Instead, I think that, like Ezekiel, Jesus is primarily concerned about life now. About how we live together in community. About how the kingdom of heaven is being made manifest on earth. And particularly about how we treat the last and the least in our midst.

I wonder if any of you have read the classic novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*. In it, there is a priest and spiritual guide called Father Zossima. And his role is to be an apologist for God's way of love in the world. There's this one line, which is particularly memorable:

“What is hell? I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love.”

There's something in those words that gets to the heart of Jesus' parable today. If we forget how to love – as individuals, as a community, as a society –, if we are

unable to show mercy, compassion and generosity to the least of our brothers and sisters, then our ultimate destination is a self-made hell.

Look at how a society treats the down and out, Jesus is saying, and you will get a sense of the state of its soul.

Jesus' parable, I think, is intended to stir us to action. To wake us from our slumber and complacency.

The language of eternal life and eternal punishment is powerful rhetoric that is meant to make us feel uneasy. We hear it and we can't help but feel uncomfortable because we know we've been indifferent to those in need.

So if you heard the language of eternal punishment and felt uneasy, then to that I'd say that the powerful rhetoric of the parable has done its job! Take note of that feeling of unease. Because it's the same unease that God in Christ feels wherever there is need, injustice, and marginalisation.

The judgement of God is not some event at the end of history. It is now and it is unfolding as we are converted time and again, day by day, month by month, to God's way of generous love in the world.

Because it is the only way to fullness of life together with our God.

I want to finish on a note of comfort, because the parable doesn't exactly end on a conciliatory note. Maybe that's the intention. Maybe we're not meant to be comforted ...we're meant to be disquieted, stirred to action.

...but I'll say it anyway. There are plenty of passages besides these two that talk about God as the Good Shepherd. For example in Psalm 100, which we sang earlier, God is simply described as the Shepherd who feeds and looks after his flock. A God who is good. Whose mercy and love is ever sure. Whose truth at all times firmly stood. And shall from age to age endure.

There's a sense of God's all-encompassing love and provision. Whether we are sheep or goats, or a messy hybrid of the two – we still belong to the flock, held, protected, nourished by the Good Shepherd. Perhaps there is hope for us goats after all. Thanks be to God. Amen.